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### Considering the Gap Between Theory and Practice: Helen Garner and Things To Talk About Later

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Considering the Gap Between Theory and Practice: Helen Garner  
and *Things To Talk About Later*

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This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the conferral of the degree:

Masters of Creative Writing - Research

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Faculty of Law Humanities and the Arts

School of Arts English and Media

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## **DECLARATION**

I, Jane Helen Scerri, declare that this thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree MCA-R, from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Jane Helen Scerri, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2016

## ABSTRACT

This practice-based creative writing research project consists of a novella, *Things to Talk about Later*, and an exegesis, *Considering the Gap Between Theory and Practice*. In both, I investigate how female desire is represented in writing.

As the main influence for this project is Helen Garner, this exegesis closely examines three of her early works: *Monkey Grip* (1977), *The Children's Bach* (1984), and the short story 'The Life of Art' from *Postcards From Surfers* (1985). Through textual analysis of these works, I examine Garner's depiction of female desire in the post-pill pre-AIDs era of Australia in the 1980s. I also touch on her thoughts on writing, including authorial authenticity, anxiety and voice. Garner has referred to the 'gap between theory and practice' in most of her early novels – the theory was that monogamy was out and free love was in. The practice was more complex and involved navigating a myriad of fault lines including the painful realities of jealousy, competition and rejection. I propose that it was through Garner's examination of these fault lines that she so successfully delineated a little talked about era in Australia's social and cultural history.

My novella, *Things To Talk About Later*, is set abroad in the 1980s and follows the travels of three young adult Australians. It consists of five separate but interrelated stories, which are linked when the protagonists reunite in the final story. These characters are the Sydney equivalent of the young creative types that inhabited Garner's fictive worlds, which were set in Melbourne in the late 1970s and early 1980s. While I explore the same fault lines as Garner and aspire to her success in delineating the sociosexual zeitgeist of the 1980s, my novella differs from hers in that it is situated abroad. As such, I use travel as both a narrative device and as a way of examining the relationship amongst cultural and sexual differences, identity, and the Other.

## KEYWORDS

Helen Garner, travel, female desire, 1980s, Australian literature, creative writing

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This practice-based creative writing project comprises a novella (*Things To Talk About Later*) and an exegesis that reflects on how that novella was created (*Considering the Gap Between Theory and Practice*). Essentially the novella represents the practice and the exegesis the theory, which in turn reflects iteratively on the novella. The production of the novella is also iterative, in that it is the result of a continuum of writing, reading, re-writing and editing. In this way I consider this overall research project to be a somewhat self-conscious enquiry into how to engage with practice, whilst embracing theory.

This exegesis focuses on the early works of Helen Garner, whose works stylistically and thematically most closely resemble what I aim to emulate in my novella. Apart from the works of Helen Garner, the other Australian writers' works that have influenced this project include Jane and Anna Campion's *Holy Smoke* (1999), which I found clearly depicted a peculiarly Australian penchant – the desire to be elsewhere and Christos Tsoilkas' novels *Loaded* (1995), *Dead Europe* (2005), and *The Slap* (2008). Tsoilkas' early novels typically represent the sexual desires and practices of young, gay, migrant men in urban Australia. Like Garner he gives voice to desires, that historically, have been little represented in Australian literature.

These works, as well as my desire to fictionally depict the zeitgeist of early 1980s Australia, inspired me to begin writing about my young adult life, a large part of which was spent living overseas. During the writing process it became increasingly evident that the fictional component of the stories had increased

considerably. Since completing my novella, the ‘truths’ that were my original inspiration have diminished, and are now little more than fragments of the finished work. The nature of young people’s attitude to travel in the 1980s – when the desire to be away, to be *elsewhere*, was often as significant as the chosen destinations is an aspect of the zeitgeist that I have tried to capture. I use travel as a narrative device to re-consider the themes of identity and the Other in conjunction with my other major concern, which is how to depict an authentic representation of female desire in 1980s Australia.

My theoretical framework is a hybrid one – a confluence of psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory. As desire is a key theme for my creative writing project, I draw on feminist writer and theorist Helene Cixous. In discussing travel, I refer to postcolonial theorist Edward Said and feminist critic Rosi Braidotti. As a way of analysing language, and the expression of love and desire within narrative, I draw on Roland Barthes’ theories of writing desire and pleasure; whose seminal text, *A Lover’s Discourse* (1978) I read in conjunction with *Monkey Grip* (1977) in 1979. When considering the most appropriate theories to apply to my creative writing project, I concur with Dominique Hecq, who advocates for a “plurality of theories” (2015, p. 64) with a focus on postcolonial theory and psychoanalysis. The confluence of these two theories — which share “an awareness that language shapes human beings, cultures and societies” as well as “an engagement with otherness” (p. 64) — is pertinent to the themes of desire and travel that I explore in both my novella and this exegesis. I also refer to Leon Surmelian’s *Techniques of Fiction Writing* (1968) when discussing the more technical aspects of constructing narrative.

The main concern of my novella and this reflective exegesis is how best to express female desirous subjects. Because I am

concentrating on desire as expressed from a female perspective, male desire is only discussed from the perspective of motif characters; Vincent from my novella, and Philip from several of Garner's early works. I shall also touch on the notion of *jouissance*, a term synonymous with sexual pleasure and orgasm, defined as "a word with simultaneously sexual, political, and economic overtones" (Cixous and Clement, 1986, p.165).

Cixous and Clement like other French feminists who have removed the term *jouissance* from its phallic origins, have also referred to it as "that intense rapturous pleasure which women know and men fear" (cited in Gallop, 1984, p. 114). They also relate *jouissance* to feminine, non-linear styles of writing, which parallel the female experience as an extended non-climactic orgasm, in contrast to more focused male orgasm. Because my characters are in their early-twenties, when social life is of primary concern, I am interested in how *jouissance* pertains to both social as well as sexual contexts. Catherine Clement attest that "in their conflicts *jouissance*, fusion and community take place" (1986, p.29). Kirsti Lempiäinen also locates *jouissance* in the context of the social, citing it as:

the interactive communication between an "I" as a female feminist subject and the social, the others. It could be described as the moment of knowing oneself in a multiple or social manner, that is, at the same time knowing means being an "I" especially because of the presence of others who share the same pleasurable space. (1997, p.112)

I find Lempiäinen's contemplation of the social as a site of pleasure/*jouissance* interesting, as it not only considers *jouissance* in relation to the Other, but also presents it as a pleasure that can be sought through communion with others, in an intimate, but not necessarily sexual, sense. The characters in both my novella and Garner's early novels inhabit similar fictive worlds. A major difference, however, is that Garner's characters are primarily

based in Melbourne, often in collective households, whereas my characters travel outside of their familiar domestic urban spaces to seek out pleasurable spaces overseas. In so doing they explore cultural and sexual differences in contexts that are often intensified by the fact that they are travelling alone. Their search for communality in unknown places, in little understood cultures, surrounded by strangers, is an aspect of travel that I have exploited in my novella to better highlight differences and altered perspectives.

While my current perspective draws on a reflection of my own social and sexual history, and has the benefit of hindsight, it lacks the immediacy and spontaneity of writing contemporaneously, and, as such, will generate a very different picture than the one Garner so adeptly depicted in her early novels which were both set in and published during the 1970s and 1980s. Through the autodiagetic voices of my female characters, I, like Garner reflect on the conflicted emotions that many women faced in the post-pill pre-AIDs era, as they navigated what was, arguably, uncharted terrain.

The key themes of my own creative writing practice are writing desire and how travel offers a useful lens by which to examine the female desiring subject. After addressing these, I shall discuss Garner's position as a writer and present a textual analysis of three of her early works: *Monkey Grip* (1977), *The Children's Bach* (1984) and her short story 'A Life of Art' from *Postcards From Surfers* (1985). I shall examine Garner's expression of female desire, her authentic depiction of Australian inner city life, the 'woman' as a creative subject in her own right, and the use of a male motif character as an object of desire. I shall also touch on the literary devices Garner employs, as well as her comments and advice on writing and the anxiety it entails. I have been drawn to

her insights throughout this practice-based project, particularly those pertaining to phoniness and authorial voice.

## CHAPTER 2: SITUATING CONCEPTS

This chapter discusses my two central themes, desire and travel. Both of these key topics are broken down into smaller sections. I use the verb *desiring* and the adjective *desirous* when referring to the desire of the subject. While they are similar in meaning, I consider ‘desiring’ to be a more direct expression of intent, whereas ‘desirous’ implies a more abstract sense of desire, one associated with reverie, and not necessarily in relation to a specific object of desire. The theme of travel will be examined as a device to propel the narratives across and within the short stories of my novella. Travel also presents an opportunity of examining an interaction with the Other; sexually, socially and culturally. I also consider travel as an absence, as in the nature of being *elsewhere*.

### 2.1 WRITING DESIRE

...desire is to lack what one has  
– and to give what one does not  
have: a matter of supplements,  
not complements (Lacan cited  
in Barthes, 1978, p.226)

The principle thematic concern of my novella — the expression of female desire in the context of the 1980s — is a subject that had been little explored in Australian literature. As Bronwyn Levy states:

in a survey of reviewing in the *Courier-Mail*, in the mid-1980s...certain categories of books (including poetry, and those by and/or about Australians, women and Blacks) were less likely to be seen as sufficiently reputable for mention in the Saturday literary pages (2001,p.223)

Similarly Hilary McPhee (2001, p.236) reported that the number of literary awards between 1975 and 1985 increased from three to twenty five, but women were not among the winners and Kate

Ahearne commented that in the mid 1980s no women had been included in the National Book Council's Ten Best Books (cited in McPhee 2001, p.47). In 1978, however, Helen Garner surprised critics and caused considerable contention when she won the National Book Council's award for *Monkey Grip* (1977). While the ratio of Australian female compared to male writers being published has increased considerably in recent years, I argue that there still exists a gap in the representation of female desire in 1980s Australian literature, by women writers, which my novella attempts to address. I shall arrange my discussion of desire into: the desire to write; as in the creative impulse; the desire that is pre-existent within narrative and language, the expression of female desire within a text; and the position of the female desiring subject. I will begin with a discussion of the psychological origins of desire within narrative, in terms of creativity and the impetus of writers to create literature.

### **2.1.1 Desire to Write**

My own desire to write began in adolescence, with a few scrawled poems. As a young reader I had progressed from mysteries to intrigues of a more psychological nature and from a young age derived my understanding of life as much from novels as from other people. After completing university, feeling intimidated by semiotics and depressed by the gloom associated with the death of the author, I sought adventure and life experience overseas. On reflection, I realise that I must have been channelling my desire to write into the aerograms and postcards I sent to friends while travelling. Years later, when I had accrued some experience, and had the beginnings of a 'past', the desire to write had begun to haunt me. To re-connect with theory in 2012, I began where I had left off in 1983, with Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* (1977). As my main literary concern is psychological, particularly centring on the representation of female desire, I proceeded to explore the

developments in feminism, semiotics and psychoanalysis since the late 1970s and post colonial theory.

Sigmund Freud speaks of the “ghosts that haunt within us” (1924, p.161), which literary critic John Crowe Ransom explains as “the myths, customs, and religion” that “make our psychical worlds” (cited in Meisel, 2004, p.5). Carl Jung describes this psychic world as the “part of the psyche that retains and transmits the common psychological inheritance of mankind” (1964, p. 107). Such statements emphasise the way that literature not only has the power to re-enforce the ghosts of myth and custom, but that it also has the power to subvert them. When discussing the ‘creative impulse’, Leon Surlmelian refers to D.H Lawrence’s explanation of art as “a (self confessed) ‘psychic need for therapy’” (1968, p.ix). Surlmelian also cites Freud’s 1908 paper, ‘The Relation of the Poet to Day Dreaming’ in which Freud states that “creation begins in fantasy or reverie or daydreaming” (p.ix). I consider the interplay between the impulse to write (creativity) and the impulse to express one’s psychic and psychological states integral to any exploration of the desiring subject.

As an avid reader, I have always been drawn to writing that deals with psychological themes, and consider fiction the most effective medium for expressing emotion and the zeitgeist of a period. In my novella I reference many of the books that were influential on both my life and my creativity in the 1980s, such as Milan Kundera’s postmodern classic *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). When referencing such texts, I debated if this kind of self-reflexivity in reflective writing might seem overwrought, or too anxious an attempt to imbue meaning. I did it anyway. I have also referred to popular music and films in my novella, using intertextuality both as a parodic device, and as a way of enhancing a sense of a particular time and place.

### **2.1.2 The Female Desirous Subject in Narrative**



Having located the impulse to write, I will now attempt to untangle the origins of the desiring subject, and how her expression is intrinsically tied to narrative. In addressing the origins of the female subject, I refer to some fundamental distinctions established by Barthes, Kristeva Braidotti and Cixous. I also extrapolate on Lempiäinen and more recent interpretations of the female desirous subject.

Firstly I cite Roland Barthes' humorous and exacting summation of what he considers that the desiring subject seeks in the object of their desire: "what I dream of is all the others in a single person; for if I united X, Y and Z...I should form a perfect figure: my other would be born" (1978, p.228). This idea of the desiring subject not being able to find the qualities they seek in one person is a common literary theme, and fundamental to narratives about infidelity, break-ups and mismatched lovers, not to mention a well-worn lament of both recent and long-term singles. I, like Garner, express this theme in my novella through the presentation of my female characters' intimate ruminations on their love and sex lives.

Secondly I refer to Kristeva's relationship between the subject and the semiotic:

the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can either be 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic and is instead marked by an indebtedness to both (1984, p.93).

This distinction refers to the split nature of the subject; the semiotic meaning the unstructured, rhythmic, feminine, in process, compared to the organised masculine symbolic order of signs and systems. In Kristevan terms, the semiotic and the symbolic are linked by the 'thetic' (1984, p.102), a process that occurs when the subject either accepts castration or reaches the mirror phase, essentially when the subject realises they are a

separate entity, enabling the “pre-condition for signification” (1984, p.102).

By locating the origin of the desirous subject in terms of psychoanalysis and through identifying its split nature, I am outlining that I am aware of such a stricture and considered this when attempting to express the psychological profiles of the young women in my novella. I also considered the extent to which, and how, their voices and desires are coded by language, which, according to semiotics is divided into signifier and signified, as well as to what extent they may be more freely expressed via the semiotic (in the Kristevan sense of the feminine). While the female desirous subjects are coded by the same signs and signifiers as their male counterparts, I argue that in speaking their desires, discussing their love lives and their intimate experiences within the text, their narrative will be, as Kristeva states, subversive.

Kristeva has described literature’s role as “one of subservience before the power of psychoanalysis” and that its function is, “like that of the slave is to serve precisely the desire of psychoanalytic theory – the desire for recognition” (cited in Lechte, 2013, p.52). Considering then, that all language, all history — both public and personal — and all drives and desires, according to psychoanalytical theory, originate in the unconscious, it would seem that in any analysis of texts, particularly those with a psychological bent, a psychoanalytic approach is almost unavoidable.

Thirdly, I cite Braidotti who describes portrayals of female desirous subjects as “alternative figurations”, of women that constitute “woman” as “a complex and multiple subject always in process” (2002, pp.2-3). More recently Braidotti described

psychoanalysis as “a very original philosophy of desire” and accordingly identified its three central elements:

The first is the notion that the subject is not one, but rather split, knotted, and complex; the second is that desire is an unconscious process connecting us to the other in a double bind of attraction and fear; the third is that power is not a negative, but a productive process of empowerment. (2011, p.37)

Bearing this in mind, it seems that the task for women writers — or male writers trying to express female desire — is to unravel the subject (the character speaking or spoken about), by undoing the complexities of personality (as created by the unconscious). By understanding the hidden fears and desires of the subject, it should then be easier to empower these subjects with a voice that represents who they really are, what they think about and what they want. So to express female desire, I must first understand the meaning inherent within language, the codes inherent within the construction of narrative, the “split, knotted” (Braidotti, 2011, p.37) nature of the subject, and the complexities implicit in attraction and the Other.

Helene Cixous draws a similar parallel when she states that:

There is an intrinsic connection between the philosophical and the literary (to the extent that it conveys meaning, literature is under the command of the philosophical) and the phallogentric. (1986, p.65)

It would seem logical then, that literature is a perfect site from which to re-represent women’s desires. It would also follow that the creation of new speaking subjects, and the increasing prevalence of female representations should weaken the dominance of the existing phallogentric bias. Considering that until as late as the end of the nineteenth century, women authors such as Emily Bronte (1818-1848) and Louisa May Alcott (1832-

1888) used male pseudonyms to publish their writing, it is not surprising that this bias still exists. The use of language is doubly significant when considering the representation of female desire. Language embodies gender and signification, private and public discourse, and also imparts lyric quality and meaning; two of the main aspects of writing that help to enhance a feminine/feminist style and position.

In *Feminist Measures, Soundings in Poetry and Theory*, Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller state that Barthes, Kristeva, and Cixous all “variously associate narrative and the novel with a repressive social order” and that they similarly consider that it is “the lyric and the poem that can potentially disrupt” (1994, p.20). Simone de Beauvoir cites poetry as trying to ‘capture what lies beyond ordinary prose’ and woman as ‘an eminently poetical being, since man projects on her everything he decides not to be’ (1949, p.235). So while the novel can be seen as a stricture when writing about female desire (considering that to write female desire one must first break from this ‘repressive social order’) it simultaneously provides an opportunity to re-code and give meaning to what, historically, has been little described. Therefore if the novel is inherently ‘repressive’ the more mimetic writing is, the less feminine it will be, due the mimetic style’s reliance on plot, sequencing and narrative closure. As my writing does tend to be mimetic rather than poetic, I must either explore poetic styles that suit my genre and personal style or find other ways to disrupt the narrative in order to present female desire.

### **2.1.3 Identity and Language in Desire**

Language is a skin: I rub my  
language against the other. It is  
as if I had words instead of  
fingers, or fingers at the tip of  
my words. My language

trembles with desire. (Barthes, 1978, p.73)

I consider language to be integral for expressing desire and pleasure, both in terms of the meaning it conveys and because of the nature of the sensory elements implicit within it. When Barthes states that the reader as subject searches for the “patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of the vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning” (1975, p.66-67), he highlights the significance of the sensory elements of the text. When speaking specifically about the language of desire, Barthes also refers to the “double contact”, a “discreet discourse” that focuses on a single signified (the desired subject) and the language that is actually spoken.

This discreet discourse, which Barthes also calls the ‘Image-repertoire’ is explained by Alan Purves as “a term coined by Barthes with which he designates the Lacanian imagery – a set of images functioning as a misunderstanding of the subject by itself” (1991, p.67). I consider this discourse to be a summation of an individual subject’s psychological, social and sexual and experience. Dominic Pettman explains the Image-repertoire as “the discursive legacy of love stories which we have imbibed and internalised since we were children often through literature” (2006, p.20). The term, used repeatedly in Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* (1978), pertains not only the narrative of desire, but also the narrative of the self, and hence the ongoing story the subject constructs about the self. In this way I also think of it as a metaphor for the myths the self accrues about their personal performance in this interaction of the sociosexual. Pettman also explains the Image-repertoire as “a code we must learn to decode” if we are to understand “the way we behave in an intimate manner” (2006, p.21).

Accordingly, I consider that this personal dialogue the subject constructs about the self, and about their developing sexual history,

as a kind of meta-dialogue and mini-narrative. As a writer I need to accurately reflect upon this interior world, the Image-repertoire of the desiring subject I am aiming to depict. Also, because desire directly involves another – the loved or desired, the object of desire – I also posit that each desiring subject is reconsidering their own image, in terms of how they perceive it appears to others. I suggest that the desiring subject may alter who they are *specifically* to accommodate the perceived desires of the Other, particularly when that subject is a young man or woman. When considering what the desiring subject desires in the Other, I shall refer to Jeanette Bernstein's explanation of Lacan's object *a*, as:

an individual never desires the other as a whole person, he or she only desires a fragment *in* the person around which he or she constructs a fantasy of love and desire. For some people it can be over and over again “a crooked smile” or the way “the hair falls in her face” or “the way his voice sounded” that engages their desire (Bernstein, 2006, p.714)

In this context, Barthes' analysis of the expression of emotion and the limitations/pleasure of language in terms of this Image-repertoire, especially when considered in conjunction with Lacan's concept of the object *a*, is particularly pertinent to the concerns of this exegesis.

Feminist Carla Kaplan, when discussing the pre-existence of desire within narrative, states that, “narrative is always, already eroticised, that it has the form of sexual desire, or that narrative is always a search for a fit listener” (1996, p.117). In this sense, narrative, with its own inherent desirous search for a “fit listener” and its own form of sexual desire, is a perfect platform from which to disrupt or alter pre-conceptions, which, as Barthes illustrates through his analysis of Balzac's ‘Sarassine’ in *S/Z* (1970) are already implicit within any text. Kaplan also states that despite the fact that codes and symbols of gender exist within texts, they can be altered, explaining that

“blacks, women, gays would be particularly invested in narrative as a means of reconstructing damaged identities” (1996, p.117).

Christos Tsoilkas’ early novels typically portray gay, migrant, working-class men’s desire in an urban setting. Like Garner he represents and potentially reconstructs the desires and identities of sections of society that have been little represented in literature. In *Loaded*, Tsoilkas’ character, Ari discusses cultural ‘otherness’ as a double bind of identity by rejecting his aspirational Greek relatives who have embraced the dominant, white Australian culture. ‘In her house all the furniture is covered in clear plastic so no dust, no dirt will stain the evidence of her material success’ (1995, p.43). Tsoilkas, as ‘a wog’ has his forensic eye on ‘wogs’ and is well positioned to authentically depict/reconstruct their desires. Describing the demarcation of Melbourne’s west/east side Ari states:

Ethnicity is a scam, a bullshit, a piece of crock. The fortresses of the rich wogs on the hill are there not to keep the *Australezo* out, but to refuse entry to the uneducated long-haired-bleached-blond-no-money-wog (1995, p.43).

These fragments from *Loaded* (1995) with their multiple references to whiteness and demarcation present a complex, hostile, intimate picture of Otherness. Feminist Beatrix Penas explains how psychoanalysis shows us how to embrace the “stranger within ourselves which in turn can show us how to embrace the stranger in society” (1996, p.100). For Tsoilkas the ‘*Australezo*’ is the primary stranger, but when class demarcation intervenes, setting the ‘wogs’ in the east apart from those in the ‘west’, a second ‘stranger’ dichotomy, ‘rich wog’/ ‘poor wog’ is defined. Similarly in Garner’s ‘The Life of Art’ the women describe themselves as ‘women like us’ (1985, p.62) positioning themselves as ‘strangers’ to current societal female norms.

Penas also illustrates the relationship between poetic language and ethics. She claims that because poetic language “includes negativity”, it has the power to “challenge any fixed identity” (1996, p.100) which is in line with Kaplan’s idea of literature being advantageous to the oppressed and under-represented in society. Both Kaplan and Penas are arguing that to represent is essentially a form of liberation in itself, and to say the unsaid – the ‘negative’ thoughts, the emotive, the difficult, the little discussed – is to give power to those who lack representation. As such, the more women’s desire is presented from the point of view of the woman as the *subject* rather than the object of the gaze, the more empowering and enduring these representations will become.

While I am not claiming that the creation of new identities is easy, especially when considering social, political and religious strictures, I do assert that literature, like music and film, has the power to alter representation and is therefore a powerful platform from which to speak. When considering the constraints implicit in the creation of new identities (for example, the pre-existence of phallogentrism), Cixous discusses the fate of women in the link between logocentrism and phallogentrism as a burial, because it “threatens the stability of masculine structure that passed itself off as eternal-natural” (2003, p.39). If, by this, Cixous means that all myths and stories would no longer contain the same truths that have been passed off as ‘natural’ under phallogentrism, then writing women’s desire from this premise can be seen as powerful in its ability to undo the bind of history, one which has traditionally been perceived as a natural bias against the female. This concurs with Cixous’ argument that literature is the perfect position from which to alter perceptions.

#### **2.1.4 Subject not Object: The Female Gaze**



To expand on Cixous' argument that narrative is the perfect platform for shifting perceptions and presenting alternative positions, I propose that the presentation of a female point of view within the text, as well as the creation of the site from which her desire originates within the narrative, establishes a position that is in opposition to phallocentrism. Historically, in fiction as well as film, women have predominately been the object of the gaze, albeit with exceptions, such as Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and Gustave Flaubert's *Madam Bovary* (1857). This means that male fantasies and male desires, as expressed from a male point of view with its innate phallocentric bias, has become recognised as the 'natural' representation of women. As a dominant perspective, the male gaze has typically classified women into stereotypes, which have included: prostitute, wife, mother and whore and throughout history; particularly in literature, women have been vilified as witches, crones and hysterics.

Creating female characters outside of such traditional stereotypes, characters that are free to act upon their desires within narrative, should therefore shift the point of view from woman as desired to woman as desirer. If these women *also* reflect upon and endorse their desires within the text, then they could be perceived as even further enhancing such a position. The main textual device to do this is voice. By using the 'I' who speaks as the subject, or by using the narrator to represent the protagonist's point of view, the object, or objects of desire, can be directly described. In this way the reader sees and desires what the female desiring subject sees and desires. This position also implies choice; it is the desirer that chooses the Other. Accordingly, I argue that in creating female subjects with strong views and desires, who also speak and act upon their desires within the narrative, the writer is disrupting and reconfiguring perceived societal/cultural norms. While it was not an explicit aim of my novella to push a particular political/feminist point of view, I did wish to authentically represent the shifts in

sociosexual behaviour that had occurred by the early 1980s, and this occurred through the representation of my female protagonists as they acted as desiring subjects.

### 2.1.5 Monogamy

When exploring female desire, it is also necessary to consider women's attitudes to monogamy during the post-pill, pre-AIDS era in Australia. Helen Garner has repeatedly referred to "the gap between theory and practice" (1980, p.53), the theory being the desirability of sexual freedom and the practice being the painful realities of jealousy, competition and rejection. Considering that this gap also represents a significant intersection between feminism and femininity, it is an ideal position from which to comment on the changing nature of women's identities, feminine desire, and the progress of feminism in Australia.

Garner refers to this gap often within her fiction, which I shall illustrate later through a textual analysis of *Monkey Grip* (1977). It is worth noting that Garner also discusses this gap directly in *Honour and Other People's Children* (1980, p.53) and *Cosmo Cosmolino* (1992, p.73) as well as exploring it in *The First Stone* (1995). The pervasiveness of attention to this 'gap' in Garner's early works underscores how important it was to her. Literary critic Kerry Goldsworthy draws attention to this recurring theme, claiming that from *Monkey Grip* onwards:

Garner's work has been illuminating such fault lines in feminist theory – the places where, in actually trying to manage their lives and language, women must choose among conflicting theories and strategies: how to interpret; how (and whether, and what) to utter; how to act. Victim or agent? Separatism or co-operation? (1996, p.6)

Goldsworthy presents this delineation of 'fault lines' — essentially a question about how women should think and act after the second

wave of feminism — as a binary political choice — one that implies a choice between ‘victim or agent’ and ‘separatism or co-operation’. I, however, argue that Garner’s writing locates and explores a space somewhere in between, or created by such fault lines. It is within this space, essentially one that deals with the emotional and psychological repercussions of the changed sociosexual and political climate, that Garner represents female desire and how women negotiate it. While politics and feminism are integral to Garner’s writing, the emotional and social lives of the characters, and how they act upon their desires remain paramount in terms of both subject matter and narrative drive. Therefore I propose that in examining the conflicted nature of monogamy, Garner represents an aspect of desire that has been little represented in Australian fiction.

Children are a separate issue, and one that Garner does not skirt around. Her early novels typically feature variously arranged collective households, usually inhabited by children, and it is within these that she deals with the issue of monogamy. While Garner presents women with desires who are free to act upon them outside of the constraints of monogamy, she also expresses the limitations and frustrations that can ensue as a direct result of having children. Goldsworthy describes the conflict inherent within desire as being “on a direct collision course with the thing in which it so often results, the family – an inescapable patriarchal institution” (1996, p.29). As such this conflict, essentially whether to become a mother or not, could also be seen as a choice between an acceptance or rejection of the ‘patriarchal institution’.

In *Monkey Grip* and *The Children’s Bach*, Garner portrays young women trying to negotiate their desires, often with children in tow. Depicted as living outside the typical nuclear family model, usually in “collective households” that embody social, sexual and political idealism, her characters attempt to skirt around this ‘patriarchal

institution' and arguably – to an extent at least – they succeed. Cixous locates the desire to procreate as similar to the “oral, anal and vocal drive” and claims these drives as strengths, positing that, “the gestation drive – just like the desire to write” is “a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood” (1976, p.891). In Australia, after the introduction of the Supporting Mother’s Pension in 1973, women did have more choices. They could leave oppressive relationships with the security of some financial assistance and, if they were able to negotiate the terrain between emotion and ideology, were free to procreate outside of the traditional family model. In fact, according to Goldsworthy, it was with the help of the Supporting Mother’s pension that Helen Garner, who was living in a share household at the time, wrote *Monkey Grip* (1996, p.12).

Garner’s early novels were provocative, with her constant reflection on monogamy and her consideration and representation of alternative family structures. She also portrayed alternatives to the traditional stereotypes of women: single mothers, women seeking sexual pleasure just for fun, and women competing in a male dominated art world.

#### **2.1.6 Pleasure/Jouissance**

Feminist Jane Gallop claims that “if *jouissance* is ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ it is not because it is beyond pleasure but because it is beyond principle” (1984, p.113). She explains that when it is a fixed principle it becomes “strong and phallic” whereas when it is used as “an emblem of French feminist theory it is non-phallic, beyond the phallus” (1984, p.114). After establishing that desire is multifarious, that it is pre-existent within language and narrative, that while it expresses a phallocentric bias this bias can be undone, I must next consider what it *is* in my novella that I wish to express. Put simply, my novella describes the 1980s era from a

young adult female point of view. As I portray an early-twenties demographic, I must consider the interplay between the desire to 'have fun' and to seek pleasure, and the anxiety associated with the establishment of and understanding of a new womanly identity. I consider pleasure to encompass the pleasure of travel, of having friends and lovers, and of simply being young. I previously referred to Kirsti Lempiäinen's contemplation of *jouissance* in terms of 'belonging' or communality, and I now consider her comparison of feminist theorists Luce Irigaray and Rosi Braidotti's interpretations of *jouissance*.

Lempiäinen cites Braidotti's notion of *jouissance* as "a vehicle for constructing embodied female subjectivity" (1997, p.105) and describes how Irigaray's 'project' is to show that woman, and thus female subjectivity, is representable through "a constant miming, constant moving because woman cannot be defined" (1997, p.105). The connection that Lempiäinen delineates between Braidotti and Irigaray's notion of *jouissance* is their shared focus on the "nomadic nature of female subjectivity" (p.106). Lempiäinen explains that the "power of *jouissance* can be used to stress the significance of sexual difference; that is, to make the sexual difference visible also from women's viewpoints" (p.106). The point that Lempiäinen makes – that such a position of difference should be described by the female subject rather than by a phallic logic – pertains to the fluidity of the movement of the characters in my novella.

I present my characters as living and acting experientially through their travels abroad, as they encounter other cultures and make sexual conquests. Like many young Australian's in the 1980s, they do not critically reflect on their normative white Australian culture. Because they can control where and when they go in the world, travel gives them a certain power. For example: when the female character in 'Madam Madam' tires of her sexual relationship, she

ends it, simply by leaving Delhi. In this instance her power comes from her mobility, her whiteness, and her relatively economically privileged position (as well as the fact that, in being cut off from her origins, she could be construed as being ‘nomadic’). I propose that such a ‘nomadic’ position facilitates the freedom to seek out sexual partners purely for pleasure/adventure. Jeanne Bernstein describes such sexual ‘adventure’ as, “an adventure into the foreign country of the other in which they can explore new – and not so new” (2006, p.720).

It is this idea of sexual adventure and freedom, running as a direct parallel to the opportunities and worlds opened up through travel, that is the sub-text of *Things to Talk about Later*. In comparison with Helen Garner’s female characters that operate outside the rules of monogamy but within domestic spaces, with ‘known’ characters in familiar locations, mine embrace ‘the unknown’ abroad in unfamiliar locations. While this encompasses an element of danger it also frees them from their own cultural and sexual mores.

## 2.2 TRAVEL AND WRITING

The locations for these stories, with the exception of London and the Caribbean are ‘the orient’, making geographical, cultural and sexual Othering central preoccupations for the characters. According to Said:

The orient is not only adjacent to Europe, it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest **and** oldest colonies, the source of its civilisations and languages, its cultural contestant, **and** one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. (1977, p.12)

Although the ‘White Australia Policy’ was abandoned in 1966, in the early 1980s ‘whiteness’ and Australia were synonymous. Considering Said’s definition of the orient as the other to the occidental world these young travellers could easily be viewed as consumerist and exploitative, particularly when interacting sexually. I have tried to depict the characters’ awareness of and consideration of such exploitation. I have also tried to express how they use geographical and cultural Otherness to enhance and reflect on their own identities.

### 2.2.1 Travel as a Narrative Device

Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticisation, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies; not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges. (Cixous, 1976, p.876)

In *Things to Talk about Later*, the state of being *elsewhere* is often as significant as the destinations travelled to. As well, the journeys undertaken are also as much about leaving the old self, and what is known, behind. Rosi Braidotti’s concept of the nomad

as in transit - “moving on, passing through, creating connections where there were previously none” (1997, p.76) - pertains to the open-ended, adventurous and flexible nature of travel.

All the stories in my novella explore this aspect of travel. For instance, Therese’s working holiday in Japan in the first story is juxtaposed with her more reflective, spontaneous sojourn in India in the third story, when she settles to paint in an Indian desert city. Braidotti describes travel as “a difficult task that translates into the need to take your bearings, to contextualize your utterances, to draw maps in a mobile manner” (2011, p.45). Accordingly, Therese is constantly re-contextualising herself. In the first story she observes the Japanese culture and its people, but remains largely an outsider. In the third story, she pursues an intimate relationship with an Afghan refugee and engages with her art practice, and in the final story she is re-united with friends and her perspective is influenced by their impressions and perceptions.

The idea that the departure from home is often more significant than the arrival elsewhere has been well expressed by Jane and Anne Campion in their Australian novel *Holy Smoke*: “We’d travelled to India ... we didn’t really know why we were going; we could have gone to many places. Anywhere that wasn’t known” (Campion and Campion, 1999, p.13). Although *Holy Smoke* was set a decade later than *Things to Talk about Later*, it similarly attempts to capture the tensions around notions of the Other and exploration of assumptions about normative culture, with a storyline that follows the transformation/re-configuration of a young Australian girl who becomes involved with a charismatic cult. Travel can indicate a rite of passage, but it can also be a way of escaping a love affair that has gone wrong. For instance, the reason my character Julia travels to India in the third story of my novella is simply to get over the fact that her boyfriend has left her. The destination is irrelevant, because



wherever Julia goes her narrative is the same: she will think, “I am loved less than I love” (1978, p.12), in accordance with Barthes’ interpretation of absence when considering the jilted lover. Even though Julia has left the country, because Julia’s boyfriend has left *her*, she cannot shake this framing discourse. I highlight this aspect of Julia’s narrative journey through her extended and repetitive conversations about both her ex-boyfriend and her previous failed relationship with the character Vincent.

Similarly, in the last of my five stories, ‘The History of Modern Art’, the recounting of Vincent’s recent failed relationship acts as the main thematic element that drives the narrative. As a narrative device, therefore, the movement of travel is an effective way of transporting characters to alternate situations. It also facilitates plot changes, denouements and climaxes, as well as resolving and amplifying emotional issues, which typically in my novella, are failed love affairs.

### **2.2.2 Travel to the Other**

The relationship between the sexes is not that of two energies, two poles: man is both positive and neutral...She is determined and differentiated with respect to man, but the reverse is not the case; she is the inessential face to the essential. He is subject; he is the Absolute (Beauvoir, 1949 p.24).

Helene Cixous, when referring to historical notions of passivity and receptivity of women, states that “a woman, by her opening up, is open to being “possessed”, which is to say dispossessed of herself” (1986, p.86). She proposes that women directly embrace not just the obvious ‘other’ represented by travel, but the other part of themselves, and that in doing so, they will refuse to continue to be repressed by historical notions of what it is to be female:

Through the same opening that is her danger, she comes out of herself to go to the other, a traveller in unexplored places; she

does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be. (1986, p.86)

Again, what is at stake here is not just the actuality of being elsewhere but the significant gains that can be made for the female desiring subject as new environments open up opportunities for difference and allow the female self to be re-configured. It was easier for young travellers to be absorbed into the culture of the Other in the 1980s with communication then restricted to postcards, aerograms, letters and the occasional expensive phone call. Accordingly I propose that these young nomads could more easily re-imagine their own recent history, even to the extent of becoming their own unreliable narrator. In this way, travel, particularly when considering youth identity and desire, presents a heightened opportunity to escape home and familiarity, as well as the chance to enter new and uncharted spaces. Such spaces, in turn, provide a duality of perspective; one, that enables a different culture to be experienced, and another that provides a backdrop from which to re-assess one's own cultural assumptions.

As Braidotti states "Consciousness-raising and the subversion of set conventions define the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling" (2011, p.26). She also argues that nomadic shifts allow "for wise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction, experience and knowledge" (p.27), and that "nomadism consists not so much in being homeless as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere" (p.45). By the 1980s young Australians had become notorious for such ease of mobility, many settling for extended periods in London, where squatting was still an option, and where cheap skilled and unskilled work was available. Australian historian David Dunstan described the Australian immigrant community in London in the 1970s and 1980s as "well defined as part of a geographic enclave and the city's extensive cultural mosaic" (2009, p.1).

Similarly when discussing Australian national identity Helen Garner reflected that “there’s a sense of horribleness that we just don’t have. I mean big, national, political horribleness” (Garner cited in Goldsworthy, 1996, p.32). While this lack of ‘horribleness’ reflects on the more positive aspects of Australia’s perceived isolation, such as peace and relative prosperity, it also suggests a certain naïveté and a degree of cultural cringe. My characters reflect upon a similar sense of the lack of a strong national identity as Garner, albeit, one that was also influenced by the cultural and political changes that occurred in the following decade when the liberal government was re-elected in Australia. These changes included the abolition of free tertiary education, the tightening of work visas for Australians in Britain, and the rise in popularity of New York as a destination for young travellers.

The characters in my novella do not consider themselves to be nationalistic. On the contrary, their sense of Australian-ness is typically expressed as a representation of cultural cringe. However, while they are cynical of Australia for its perceived naiveties, they are also aware that it is a safe haven, and though it is not discussed, it is implied that they will return to Australia at a later date. This open-ended nature of travel for young Australians in the 1980s was facilitated by the fact that could still quite easily get work in London, even though the five-year visas had been restricted to two years under changes introduced by the Thatcher government (Dunstan, 2009, p.1).

In the 1980s, Australian author Donald Horne states that Australians considered the return “‘home’ to Britain as a rite of passage” (1980, p.4). I explore this idea of London as a base in three of the stories in my novella. Anna lives and works in London, Therese uses it as a base, and Vincent claims the British dole, even though he lives in Turkey. While Therese and Vincent spend most of their time

exploring the 'exotic' oriental locales of India, Japan and Turkey, Anna is based in London, where she works and mixes with a broad cross-section of British society.

In her article "Questioning the value of the 'interior journey'", Maureen Mulligan posits the political position of post-colonial women writers as being concerned with their own 'inner journey', whereby "the foreign country is reduced to an exotic or hostile backdrop to the drama of the personal life of the author" (2005, p.7). She also claims that in their avoidance of "contact with other cultures" that "concentrates on unpeopled landscapes and untouched wildernesses," they are converting 'the other' into an "exotic backdrop to their own more pressing Western concerns" (p.7). While the main characters in *Things to Talk about Later* comment on 'the Other' and 'difference', their primary concerns are experiential and pleasure seeking and, as such, their political engagement could be construed as limited. They could therefore easily be accused of treating the foreign country as "a backdrop for their personal dramas" (Mulligan, 2005, p.7). The character Julia, in my third story, is so obsessed with her 'inner journey', which for her is the breakdown of her recent relationship that she barely comments on India or its inhabitants. This, however, is the point of my novella: to present these young women and one young man as they were, including their pressing concerns, pre-occupations and assumptions, as they would have presented in the 1980s.

### **2.2.3 Elsewhere as Exile**

Edward Said has discussed the state of marginality, of being elsewhere, as being exposed to "the provisional and risky rather than the habitual" and as a commitment to "innovation and experiment rather than the authoritatively given (status quo)" (2000, p.369). A consideration of sameness and status quo is

particularly relevant when considering Australia in the early 1980s, as it was culturally and historically considered simultaneously as both a site of exile and a place to escape from, due to its geographical as well as perceived cultural isolation. In this way young travellers, either escaping from or seeking exile, were afforded, as Said claims, a “double perspective”, in that “the exile sees things in terms of what is left behind and what is actual here and now” (p.378).

While the main characters in my novella lack a clear career direction and are not confident enough to describe themselves as artists, they do consider themselves to be unconventional and, as such, find it easy to be critical of their origins. In my last story, for example, Therese and Anna play with identity by pretending that they are English when forced to confront a busload of Australians in Istanbul. This simple example of the fluidity of identity is part of the allure of travel, a kind of freedom that derives from being both unknown and inhabiting the unknown. As Said claims, travel provides the opportunity to “become a beginner in your circumstances” allowing “an unconventional style of life and, above all, a different, often very eccentric career” (2000, p.379). In positioning my characters abroad, pushing them out of their comfort zones, I am forcing them to confront other cultures and their own identity, as well as seeking fulfilment and/or pleasure as they act upon their desires. As my character Julia is obsessed with her own “inner journey” she is more resistant to experience and much less reflective than the characters, Therese and Anna. Therese, through her relationship with Kossim faces cultural difference directly, and attempts to reconcile her sexual/cultural behaviour. Anna, the most contemplative of the three young women remains largely an observer, and though reflective is less successful in acting upon her sexual desires.

The movement of travel, of ‘becoming’, of deciding when to move, to arrive, or to leave, is a constant momentum/drive that acts in the same way as desire in its eternal search for the Other and for *elsewhere*. In this way, the use of travel as a narrative device is the main point of difference between Garner’s early works and my novella. A shifting of my characters’ perspectives of travel also sharpens a contemplation of identity and the Other, as the characters are forced to view their home in contrast with wherever they happen to be, and themselves in relation to other people of different cultures. As Said asserts, “every scene or situation in the new country necessarily draws on its counterpart in the old country”(2000, p.378). Therefore, my characters are on open-ended journeys and could be construed as existing in a voluntary if temporary exile, one that provides a distance from which they can view and see themselves as separate from the culture they have left behind.

Said also states that “Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense represents restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others” (2000, p.373). Such ‘movement’ reflects on the drive inherent within desire, particularly when considering the early twenties age group. The notion of being elsewhere provides an opportunity to define and re-define one’s identity through the knowledge and insights gained through travel, as well as the fluidity of a frequently shifting perspective. Rather than aspiring to be intellectuals, the characters in my novella align more closely to the ideals of the Sydney Push movement that preceded them in the late 1960s. Anne Coombs described the Sydney Push as “an anti-intellectual intellectual movement, a non-activist social movement, a philistine cultural movement” (1996, p.x). By the 1980s, however, the hippy and punk movements began to influence what had previously been an essentially existentialist philosophy.

Coombs also claims that what mattered in the Sydney Push movement was “that you were a good talker, a good drinker and companionable” (1996, p.x). This ideal, as well as the eschewal of material success, career, marriage and conformation to societal norms also typifies the characters in Garner’s early novels and my own novella. Although my characters are not ostensibly political or intellectual, they are engaged culturally, and often refer to films, music and literature, and consequently are invested in the collective unconscious, particularly as it pertains to their own generation. At around the same period, Ursula Le Guin had described the collective unconscious as “the source of true community; of felt religion; of art, grace, spontaneity and love” (1979, p.63), which I relate to the spontaneous nature of the pleasure that can be experienced through travel. Le Guin’s version of a collective unconscious also expresses how communality is achieved through interaction with the Other; culturally, socially and sexually. In order to translate this sense of communality to writing it is necessary to understand and subsequently delineate the zeitgeist of a particular era, a challenge I have encountered when writing reflectively. I may remember feelings about my own experiences in the 1980s, but they are subtle, fleeting and intangible.

In summary, in my novella I use travel as a vehicle to depict female desire, whilst also trying to capture the zeitgeist of the 1980s era. Through shifting the landscape in which the young women exist from home to abroad, I allow them and the reader to explore the “nomadic nature of female subjectivity” (Lempiäinen, 1997, p.106), as they seek pleasure, fulfillment and new experiences. While many of the nomadic generation described in my novella spent years abroad, others quickly returned home to an Australia that, though perceived by some to be culturally lacking, was generally considered to be a democratic and safe haven. Whether this generation returned home or not, they had

access to contraception and abortion while overseas, and although it was often not very well paid, work in London. With AIDs not quite on the horizon, they were also well placed to explore their desires and pleasures at leisure, as through travel, they encountered not only other cultures, but, the Other within themselves.

Helen Gilbert asserts that the difficulties of the colonial writer, ‘positioned on the cusp between home and exile’ manifest for ‘the expatriate artist who has chosen exile’ as a “static perspective” which ‘necessarily bases notions of cultural identity on the past’ (1993, p.64). What is even more pertinent to young, white, and in my case, female Australians that sought exile abroad in the 1970s/1980s is what Edward Said describes as “standing away from home in order to look at it with the exile’s detachment” (cited in Gilbert, 1993, p.64). Not only were these relatively privileged travellers often returning to their historical origins (Britain and Europe) they were also, by virtue of being elsewhere well-positioned to gain a perspective on Australia, its culture, and its politics.



## CHAPTER 3: PRECEDENTS OF PRACTICE

In this section I will examine Helen Garner's position as a writer in Australia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, focusing particularly on her attitudes to feminism. This will be expressed through a textual analysis of key topics found in Garner's early texts: desire and female relationships, the desire of artists to create, the use of a motif character as an object of desire, and how Garner refers directly to the "gap between theory and practice" within her fiction (Garner, 1980, p.53).

### 3.1 HELEN GARNER AND THE 1980s

Helen Garner's early novels and position as a writer are central to the framing of this exegesis. There are three main concerns that critics have raised when examining her writing: firstly, and most notoriously, is her position as a feminist, which was brought to the fore when she published *The First Stone* (1995); secondly is her writing style; and thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, is her use of the authorial 'I'.

Catherine Lumby summed up the zeitgeist of the period in which Garner's early novels were published as having given:

my generation of middle-class women – the older end of the Gen X-ers – a bunch of stuff most of us didn't even know we had. An expectation we would find a career and support ourselves. A relatively guilt-free response to sex and relationships. (1997, p.xxvi)

This 'expectation', at least in certain circles, is a casual reference to what the first wave of feminism had achieved; that women were now in a position to support themselves, set up independent households, and have sex outside of monogamous relationships. When reflecting on this period, Garner refers to the single

mother's pension "as a kind of grant" that enabled her to continue with her writing (cited in Goldsworthy, 1996, p. 12). The shared assumption was that things had changed and women were now equal players, both sexually and in the workplace.

Garner's fictive worlds can be understood to grapple with and extend psychological constructions of the feminine. Toril Moi (2004, p.4) delineates the 'feminist' as representing the political position, the 'female' the biological and the 'feminine' the cultural. Accordingly Garner's fictive women could be construed as a confluence of all three constructs. Her female characters are historically aware of their new political position, they are free to discuss 'biological' issues such as childbirth and child rearing, and they are liberated enough to explore their 'feminine' attributes by acting upon their sexual desire. In seeking pleasure/*jouissance* these female characters could also be construed as subverting the patriarchal status quo regarding the role of women before the 1970s.

However, while new attitudes were emerging, they were still, as Australian feminist Elizabeth Grosz explains, quite tentative. Gross delineates the "fine line" feminists have had to take between "intellectual rigour (as defined in male terms) and political commitment (as feminists see it)", concluding that both positions "demand a purity of position" (1995, pp.45-46). Garner's expressed interest to the 'gap between' indicates her uneasiness with too strong a commitment to a feminist position, even as she enacted it in her writing. Kerry Goldsworthy notes in her biography of Helen Garner that rather than claiming to be a feminist, Garner acknowledges earlier feminists for making it possible for her to "write books at all" and quotes her self-conscious grappling with the precepts of feminism:

I still have trouble even now with the thought that I'm not as worthy as a man...It's a kind of female cringe that we recognised in ourselves when feminism gave us a way

of looking at ourselves usefully. (cited in Goldsworthy 1996, p.22)

Later, however, Garner was more explicit when she acknowledged that “Two things got me out of a big mess at a certain point in my life. One was feminism and the other was the whole ethos of collective households” (cited in Goldsworthy, 1996, p.28). Like Garner, I also write from a position of assumed feminism, though the period I address in my novella is roughly a decade later than that of Garner’s, and reflects a politically and culturally changed landscape; one in the throes of globalisation and the onset of the AIDs epidemic. I am interested in just how Garner expressed the then relatively new attitudes to sex and love in her early novels; in the specificity of the new freedoms afforded women by feminism, how they took them up, how they struggled with them, how they talked about them, and the contradictions that they encountered whilst navigating what was arguably then new terrain.

Goldsworthy also refers to Garner’s treatment of love and desire in terms of agency:

Her fiction explores the degree to which romantic love is constituted by female desire; the degree to which it is perceived as a cultural construct; and the degree to which by definition, it limits feminine agency. (1996, p.30)

Literary critic Pam Gilbert expands on this idea of agency, explaining how Garner, through her writing, is able to subvert rather than uphold this rigour by smashing familial stereotypes as she challenges traditional family/household models. Gilbert argues that Garner does this through her use of language to express a persistently female point of view:

Her novels and her stories demonstrate her attentiveness to the web of language within which women, men and children make meaning out of their lives, her sensitivity to the patterns and structures which bind them and her ability to slash these webs and patterns and structures to

display their hypocrisy, their danger, their limitation.  
(1988, p.24)

Given the relative lack of women's writing voices in Australian literature before 1977, I would argue that the furore surrounding the release of *Monkey Grip*, when reviewer Peter Corris claimed she had "published her private journal rather than written a novel" (1977, p.12), was more to do with the disruptive feminine/feminist position that the novel represented than with its style and subject matter. Cixous, using Lacan's distinctions of the unconscious, discusses the codes implicit within women's writing and advocates speaking and writing as the most direct route to female agency:

defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be theorized, enclosed, coded...But one can begin to speak. Begin to point out some effects, some elements of unconscious drives, some relations of the feminine Imaginary to the Real, to writing. (1986, p92)

As a writer of both fiction and non-fiction, and also as an Australian social commentator, Garner has often divided critics. *Monkey Grip*, (1977) with its digression from formal closed narrative, and its particularly female concerns, caused critics, such as Corris to claim that Garner was unable to separate herself from the voice of her characters: "The 'I' of the book Nora is indisputably the author herself" (1977, p.12). Considering this criticism, it is interesting to read Garner's reflection within the novel on the women's movement, as she speaks directly to the reader through the character Nora:

I blushed in shame for us women whose guns are too big these days, who learned ten years ago to conduct great sexual campaigns with permanency in mind, while today it is a matter of skirmishes, fast and deft. (1977, p13)

I consider that Corris' criticism is more a misunderstanding of a feminine narrative – one that meanders and does not adhere to a linear pattern – than a valid criticism of Garner's text. Kate Ahearne, when referring to the character Elizabeth's shifting attitudes to her relationship with Philip in *The Children's Bach*, describes the "measuring of new positions" and "the hardening into new and more appropriate configurations" (1986, p.48) as reader follows writer through the "ever more complex patterning of adjustments being made". This description of constant shifting and adjustments can equally be applied to Garner's characters' relationships as to Garner's narrative structure. Tegan Bennet Daylight goes further to link Garner's approach to structure to her feminist impact, as she links the thematic with the structural elements in her review of *The Children's Bach*:

The controversy centred not just on the fact that Garner was writing explicitly about sex and women's desire...Garner had done something to the novel, had dismantled our idea of what it should be, what a structure was. (2012, p.18)

I therefore posit that Garner's narrative style challenged traditional and patriarchal approaches to fiction writing in Australia, as she thematically analysed female desire and the changing nature of what 'a relationship' had come to mean in the latter part of the last decade, particularly for the subset of inner-city, collective household types that she was writing about. Owen Richardson describes Garner's world as comprising:

educated men and women of Melbourne's inner suburbs, not especially well off, often intellectual or creative in bent, who came to maturity in the political and social changes of the late sixties and seventies. (1997, p.97)

While Garner's narratives are set in urban domestic settings and are predominately about the personal rather than the political, she casually inserts current social and political issues into her texts. In

*The Children's Bach*, when the character Athena states that "every baby reminds her of the photograph of baby Azaria" (1984, p.10), Garner is drawing attention to the single most documented case in Australia's history, emphasising not only the very Australian context in which she writes, but her non-judgmental attention to what was then a hotly debated subject.

I argue that inserting such information into a fictive text heightens its importance, and, as such, operates as a feminist political subtext through the narrative. Similarly, in Garner's short story 'The Life of Art', the issue of abortion is dealt with swiftly and lyrically: "He put a great bolt of gauze up me. This was the sixties before feminism" (1985, p.60). The first line of this statement is emotive and feminine, the second, distanced and factual. Similarly, in my novella, while the characters consider themselves to be politically aware, it is their personal concerns that are prioritised. There are exceptions, for example in 'Madam Madam', when Therese becomes involved with an Afghan refugee she is forced to confront her own privileged position in contrast with the socio-political implications of his statelessness.

### **3.2 TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF HELEN GARNER'S EARLY WORKS**

'What disgusts you?'  
'Oh my whole life, sometimes. Things I've  
done. Things I haven't done. My big  
mouth. My tone of voice. The gap between  
theory and practice (Garner, 1980, p.53)

The following textual analysis focuses on how Garner succinctly portrays women's internal worlds, including their sexual and artistic desires, as she writes her female desiring subjects. A discussion of *Monkey Grip* (1977) concentrates on an expression of young love and sexuality, sexual obsession and the "gap

between theory and practice” (Garner, 1980, p.53). An examination of ‘The Life of Art’ (1985) reflects upon the position of the woman as artist, and an analysis of *The Children’s Bach* (1984) will illustrate Garner’s use of a symbolic male figure of desire, the motif character Philip.

### 3.2.1 Monkey Grip

The book is not just about loving a junkie; it is about trying to love and let go at the same time; trying to put into practice the idea of “free love”, of shared partners and trying to be stoic about the kind of pain this causes (Daylight, 2012, p.18).

In *Monkey Grip*, described by Goldsworthy as “one of the first sexually explicit and sustained expressions of female desire in Australian women’s writing” (1996, p.15), we follow the plight of Nora, a single mother, who is determined in every way. She is determined to be a good mother, to express her love and desire, and she is even more determined *not* be bogged down by convention, monogamy or mediocrity. The narrative is addictive and at times exhausting. The intensity of Nora’s love for her junkie boyfriend, Javo, is paralleled by his eternal quest to alternatively score or get clean, which operates like a rollercoaster that drives the narrative. Nora eschews her feelings of jealousy and espouses her ideal of ‘free love’ by having sex with other men. When entertaining Francis, with whom she is not in love, she assumes that the reader is more privy to her thoughts, feelings and intellect than her sexual partner. She confides to the reader,

...and he talked, as twenty-three-year-olds will, about what love means and where sex fits in and so on. It was years since I’d heard someone going through the basics so painstakingly and seriously. (Garner, 1977, p.35)

Her language is confidential, almost conspiratorial, and we have no choice but to share her view of the naïveté of Francis, whereas

she (and it follows ‘we’) are beyond such elementary discussion on the state of play that existed between women and men at the time. The fact that Garner is representing this variation on a sexual relationship – a lukewarm one in which the woman is willing to participate simply for fun or immediate sexual gratification – provides an interesting counterpoint to her presentation of Nora’s obsession with Javo. It also portrays another side of Nora, a woman who is sexually in control. As the young female characters in Garner’s early works try to dispel the constraints of monogamy they could be considered to be in a state of ‘becoming’, a concept integral to the feminist discussion of how to write women’s desire, as exemplified by Braidotti who speaks of the “alternative figurations” of “woman” as “complex and multiple subject always in process” (2002, pp.2-3).

As well as describing the jaded nature of Nora’s desire, Garner has also shifted the woman’s voice away from the position of ‘the desired’ to the desirer, from the object of desire to the subject of desire. However, in this instance, Nora is more interested in analysing Francis’ outdated sociosexual attitudes than their actual sexual experience. This suggests control, distance and coolness, not attributes commonly associated with the young female subject in romantic or sexual relationships. In Lacanian terms, Nora could be considered to be representing ‘the unconscious’ by disrupting the signified order, and according to Cixous she could be considered to be:

challeng[ing] “phallo-logocentric” authority through an exploration of the continent of female pleasure, which is neither dark nor lacking, despite the anxieties of patriarchal tradition. (Gilbert, p.xv, 1986)

This candid presentation of women as desiring subjects is quite in opposition to traditional representations of women in literature. In many of Garner’s texts the reader sees the fictive world through



the point of view of the female characters as desiring subjects. Bronwyn Levy referring to the 1970s/1980s describes a 'recent Australian tradition of female writers who explore the politics of private life' (2001, p.225) She notes that this 'often involves *critiques* of love and romance and, usually, there is a central female character (sometimes an artist or writer) who 'achieves self-realisation' (p.225). This is particularly pertinent to *Monkey Grip* and 'The Life of Art', whose central female characters are a writer and artists respectively. An exception is *The Children's Bach*, which is written from a third person point of view, with a discreetly distanced narrator, and is a novel in which Owen Richardson claimed "the author has largely disappeared" (1997, p.100).

While Nora does have sex with other men (theory) it is only Javo that she loves (practice). Her passion for Javo involves an inconvenient jealousy. When Nora's friend Rita mentions that she had seen Javo "with a red haired girl", Nora, speaking as narrator, says "I erected instantaneously a great castle of paranoia with glittering towers and battlements" (Garner, 1977, p.78). The next day Nora reflects on the gap between theory and practice as she watches him flirt with Lillian, who she describes as having shared "a past of such bitterness that it was all we could do to greet each other without a grimace, the rigours and theories of feminism notwithstanding" (p.79). Later in the novel, Nora's friend Angela is outraged when a mutual friend sleeps with her boyfriend. Nora's response is:

But – if you think that, what've we been agonising about all this time? All that stuff about breaking out of monogamy? Jesus Eve! Angela, too miserable to care about theory took another swig from her glass of beer (Garner, 1977, p.192)

Referring to the "gap between theory and practice" in *Monkey Grip*, Larissa McLean Davies claims that when "endeavouring to

make politics material”, other “sensory” qualities such as intuition, feeling and perception have been compromised” (2009, p.65). She also argues that the gap is widened when “individual feeling, perception and desire cannot be accommodated” (p.65). I, however, consider that it is precisely by delineating the distinctions between theory (feminism), and practice (behaviour), which in this case is sociosexual behaviour, that Garner captures the zeitgeist of how women enacted their desires and conducted their social lives in the period she is portraying. A point of difference that becomes obvious with hindsight is that while these women were partaking in ‘free love’, they were doing so based on the premise of equality, which, arguably, was a false premise, albeit one that made for feisty discussion and experimentation in a Whitlam-esque era where things were changing and for the better (Whitlam, 1972).

### **3.2.2 ‘The Life of Art’**

In ‘The Life of Art’, a short story from Garner’s *Postcards From Surfers* (1985) collection, Garner comments on the position of women as aspiring artists. There is an overriding tone of hopelessness in this poignant short story about two female artists who are “feeling adrift”. Throughout the story is the constant refrain “That was the sixties; before feminism”(p.60), until at the end it becomes “This was in the 1980s after feminism” (p.60), when Garner describes the smell of oil paint as having “masculine connotations” and the women describe themselves as “women like us” (p.62). What Garner captures so well here is the absence of established guidelines for how to behave. Garner uses the repeated “women like us” motif to comment not only on the plight of female artists in a male dominated art world, but also to express the ambiguous state of play for these women, who have not only embraced feminism, but have also acted upon their desires:

‘Women like us’ I said to my friend, ‘don’t have men like that...Because men won’t do those things for women like us. We’ve done something to ourselves so that men won’t do it’ (1985, p.62)

This passage shows how well Garner articulated, before others, the tensions between theory and practice regarding sexual behavior of women in the zeitgeist of the 1980s. This is what I also aspire to depict in my novella. I am drawn to the often ambiguous space where social change occurs, a space that arguably, has been little represented in fiction about Australia in the 1980s. Noteworthy novels of the decade by Australian women writers, that depicted the 1980s Australian cultural landscape and also dealt with female concerns include Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks* (1980), Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well* (1986) and Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987). Davidson’s novel was controversial in that it depicted a woman single-handedly herding a caravan of camels from the centre of Australia to the coast. Morgan’s search for her true Aboriginal identity directly addressed Otherness and Jolley’s complex novel is full of symbols of female desire, not least the central symbol of the well.

With her evocative and direct language, Garner has a knack of getting straight to the heart of the matter. Consider, for instance: “On the days when she was not painting theatre sets for money she went to her cold and dirty studio in the city and painted for the other thing, whatever that is” (1985, p.60). These lines express Garner’s keen acuity in regard to the self-consciousness of the woman creative practitioner (artist or writer), with the casual dismissal of “the other thing, whatever that is” representing her creativity. The implication is that creativity is even more of an abstract concept for women than their love/sex lives, now that they have become ‘women like us’. Similarly in my novella, the two artist characters, Therese and her friend Dianne, never refer

to themselves as artists, even though Diane is studying at The Slade, a prestigious London art school and supplementing her income by working as a prostitute.

To conclude, 'The Life of Art', with its use of a repeated motif phrase about feminism, is an example of how Garner's desirous subjects compete in the male arena of creative practice. However, although these women have established a certain freedom to do what they want artistically as well as sexually, they are still negotiating the space between theory and practice.

### **3.2.3 The Children's Bach**

*The Children's Bach* (1984) is centered on five main characters whose lives are intricately interwoven. It portrays three women as they negotiate their love/sex lives with two men. Philip represents an object of desire for all the women, and Dexter is the patriarchal, albeit slightly eccentric, husband of Athena. Music is the main motif of this compressed novella, pervading the narrative and operating as a kind of sub-text, that echoes, amplifies, and at times even parodies the tension of the plot. However, for the purposes of this analysis I will focus on Garner's use of a male motif character, Philip.

I am particularly interested in the way that Garner has projected the desire of three different women onto a single male character. As a self-absorbed musician, Philip represents a shift away from the provider/breadwinner stereotype of masculinity, and thereby represents an alternative to the typical patriarchal male subject of desire. Garner's Philip is a charming, good-looking, slippery "when she pressed him he was not there" (p.42) kind of character that Garner uses as a kind of screen - one onto which female desire can be projected. Early in the novel, Elizabeth is looking

for gratification and pleasure. As the scene goes on Garner describes her approach to negotiating the sexual exchange; “Like most women she possessed, for good or ill, a limitless faculty for adjustment” (p.42). It is the women in *The Children’s Bach*, not Philip, who take on the active role of the pursuer, while also constantly calibrating their behaviour. There is a sense of universality about Philip whose character is generalised as well as unattainable. This is a common variant of desirability, ‘the hard to get’ or ‘unreliable’ that Garner addresses in the three texts that I examine in this exegesis.

Once again feminism is an implicit theme in *The Children’s Bach*. Early in the novel, Mr. Fox describes Elizabeth as the type of woman “who’d throw round terms like ‘the orthodox feminist position’” (p.6). The narrative then shifts between his opinion of Elizabeth and her opinion of him. Garner’s women in all three of the stories that make up *The Children’s Bach* are seeking love or at least sex; which by the late 1970s were recognised as not mutually exclusive. Garner is quick to translate this new status quo to literature, as expressed again through the character, Elizabeth who waits a whole Saturday afternoon for Dexter “because she wanted to fuck somebody and at the time there was no one else” (p.3). However, it is Philip, Elizabeth’s ‘sort of’ boyfriend who becomes the common symbol of the women’s desire in the novel. It is interesting that there is little conflict between the women in their pursuit of Philip. Instead Garner focuses on each woman’s internal conflict regarding her desire; a subject they refrain from discussing with each other. Even when Philip and Dexter’s wife, Athena, run away to Sydney together, it is as if Athena is sleepwalking; as if her desire, blinded by lust/love, renders her unaccountable and thereby blameless for her infidelity.

While the women project their desires onto Philip, and all manage to have sex with him, he remains self-absorbed and unattainable, his aloofness somehow rendering him unaccountable for his sexual activities. Even when Philip has sex with Elizabeth's younger sister Vicky, Athena is more concerned with the possibility that Vicky might be pregnant, than that she had been taken advantage of by Philip, laughing it off and calling her "a little monkey" (p.53). This reaction shows not only the liberal attitudes that prevailed in Garner's collective households, but a presumption of young teenager girl's sexual availability. In comparison, near the end of the novel, when Dexter also seduces Vicky in a fumbling encounter in which they are both drunk, Dexter is distraught. His remorse is in stark contrast to Philip's earlier and nonchalant seduction of the young girl.

In *The Children's Bach*, Garner provides a metaphor for how to write via the advice Philip gives in relation to song writing: "Take out the clichés ... Just leave in the images ... Make gaps...Don't explain everything. Leave holes. The music will do the rest" (p.131). Ironically, literary critic Peter Hayes insisted that Garner's was not real prose because she lacked "economy, precision, euphony, balance, or sensitivity to nuance and shades of meaning" (2009, p.86). By contrast, Don Anderson was laudatory in his summation of Garner's contribution to literature with this novel:

There are four perfect short novels in the English language. They are in chronological order, Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Hemingway's, *The Sun Also Rises* and Helen Garner's *The Children's Bach*. (cited in McPhee, 2001, p.243)

To digress slightly, Lacan's object *a* is a useful way of understanding the desire associated with both Garner's Philip

and the Vincent character in my novella. It is their confidence and sexual appeal - their perceived object *a* - that to a large degree makes them a motif character. Goldsworthy's description of Garner's Philip as "a kind of screen onto which female desire is projected" (1996, p.34) aligns with the Lacanian object *a*, as each woman sees the same Philip, but each see what they want to see, their own object *a*, their own version of desirability.

One difference between Garner's Philip and the male motif character in my own novella is that although Vincent has had sex with all the women and is considered desirable, his role is more as an exemplar. He does not remain an object of desire for the female protagonists in the novella, with the exception of the cameo character Julia, who is his ex-girlfriend. What Vincent represents is an ideal of what these young women like and seek in men. He treats women as equals and prefers their company to that of other men. In return, he is respected and is generally considered more stylish and sought after than most of his male contemporaries. However, in the final story of my novella, even Vincent loses in love.

## CHAPTER 4: MY CREATIVE PRACTICE

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf claimed that fiction should “stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction” (1992, p.20). This is a stricture worth considering when constructing fictive scenarios. Conversely, creative non-fiction and semi-autobiography, though they borrow narrative devices from fiction, rely on the fact that their content is implicitly derived from ‘truth’. So where to situate my novella, *Things to Talk about Later*? Although I drew on personal memories, considering the extent of its fictional content, the fact that it focuses on a fixed time frame, and that its thematic elements are exaggerated and compressed respectively, it falls into the genre of prose fiction. Because the five stories are interrelated and collectively total around sixty thousand words, it constitutes a novella, rather than a novel or collection of short stories. In writing this novella I aspired to present to the reader the same sense of authenticity and currency that Garner achieved in her early works. Specifically, by focusing on the socially and culturally dynamic period of the 1980s, I hoped to have articulated what people, specifically young women, were doing, thinking and talking about at this time.

In comparing creative writing to other fields of inquiry, Dominique Hecq asserts that for creative writers the emphasis is on process, positing the one that involves “consciously manipulating the unconscious and being unconsciously driven by it” (Harris cited in Hecq, 2015 p.67). This transference of information and ideas between the unconscious and the writer, and subsequently the writer and the work, raises the question to what degree the writer is in control of this process: essentially, the interchange that occurs between the cognition of, and the



manipulation of the unconscious. Or as Margaret Atwood succinctly puts it “the book, as a form expresses its own emotions and thoughts, while concealing from view the person who has concocted them” (2002, p.133). Which in turn, raises a question about the degree to which the writer’s perspective is affected by their personal history. And if it is, how much of that history informs the narrative? It also suggests a choice between control and allowing a degree of stream of consciousness, yet another dilemma I grapple with in my creative process.

Overall, my novella consists of five stories that work individually and as part of a collection. The novella has three strands: Anna’s story, Therese’s story, and the male motif character, Vincent’s story, expressed mainly through the points of view of Anna and Therese. While Therese explores the exotic east, working in Japan as a hostess before travelling in India for a few months, Anna is situated in London and later on an exclusive island in the Caribbean. The male character, Vincent, although he is referred to in the first four stories, doesn’t appear until the fifth. Set in Istanbul, this story unites the three main characters and links the group of five stories.

Through the perspective of the female characters in my novella, I explore the themes of desire and identity. By situating them in foreign locations, I use travel as a narrative device to express their ‘Australian-ness’, in contrast to wherever else they happen to be. The movement of travel and the impetus to be nomadic - including the when, why and where to move on to - provides context and identifies issues of time and place as well as underscoring themes, sub themes and plot lines for the narratives. As the nature of travel also includes a quest to arrive, to reach destinations, it also provides structural drive, and climaxes within both the individual stories and my novella as a whole. In this way

the nomadic impulse runs parallel to the narratives of desire and love.

In the first story, 'Elegant Chopsticks', which is set in a Ginza karaoke bar in Japan, Therese is employed as the signature *gaijin* (foreigner) hostess. The ritualization of culture is presented almost as a trope, with Therese dressing as a Hollywood 'movie star' and parodying her own lack of refinement, in contrast to the stylised and mannered Japanese hostesses with whom she works. Almost slapstick in tone, this story highlights the strictures and absurdities of convention, and the ambiguities that can occur as cultures meld. When asked to sing a song from her country, Therese sings John Denver's 'Country Roads', illustrating both the dominance of American culture as it existed in Japan in the early 1980s, and her own reflexive rejection of Australia (the song's refrain of "take me home" recalls the American West rather than the Australian outback). This story, with its compressed nature and situational setting was most suited to a first person voice in the present tense.

The second story 'On Reception' gives Anna's ironic, yet somewhat intimidated account of day-to-day life at Kent's Relaxation Centre in London. Fearful of her boss, Josie, who owns several similar establishments and mistrusts all her workers, Anna is *just* 'on reception'. From the front desk she observes and reflects upon the plight of women in this profession and the cross section of London life she is exposed to. Although this story, told from Anna's third person point of view, is a light-hearted parody, it also reflects on inequality and the itinerant nature of Australian workers in the UK, as well as exploring prostitution, a subject that is particularly useful in revealing the attitudes to sex, sexual identity and morals of a given period.

The third story, like the fourth and the fifth are all told from a third person perspective. 'Madam Madam', is set in India and begins as a journey into the unknown. This story has two intertwined narratives; the first is Therese's exploration of sex with her cultural 'other', an Afghan refugee called Kossim. The second is her developing but conflicted friendship with Vincent's ex-girlfriend, Julia, who has turned up in India unannounced. The 'exotic' soon becomes daunting, as Therese loses interest in Kossim, who is desperate to procure a passport and escape his untenable living situation. Although Therese feels guilty, she leaves him and continues her travels to the desert, this time with Julia in tow.

In the fourth story, 'It's Me She's Angry With', Anna is working as a chef for a London record company on an exclusive island in the Caribbean. This story is essentially a pastiche of eighties tropes of wealth and excess, featuring a myriad of characters that Anna observes and interacts with from her central position in the kitchen. Her main role is to pander to the needs of the French wife of her boss, Monique, and her demanding nanny, Mildred. Whilst doing this she reflects on the pedestrian nature of the well to do, their relationships, and their foibles. While Anna does have a brief liaison with a young South African man, she remains largely an outsider, and could be construed as Other: both in terms of her lowly status (in service to the rich white dominant class) and in terms of her sexual value to/objectification by, this arrogant young South African man.

The last story, 'A History of Modern Art,' is essentially Vincent's, and links the group of stories. Vincent is very 'modern', in that he considers himself a feminist, and could, by virtue of his confidence as well as his sexual and social success, be considered to embody a certain phallocentrism. It is in this regard that I compare him to Garner's Philip, who appears in *The*

*Children's Bach* (1984) and *Monkey Grip* (1977) as well as several of her other short stories. However, I present this motif character atypically, as I am interested in Vincent's emotional demise rather than his prowess. The story is also about aspiring artists and cultural confusion, when a young Turkish man, Mustafa, befriends Therese and Anna at The Pudding Café and invites them back to his mansion to view his original Chagall. By situating the last story in Istanbul, a city with a diverse and ancient culture – the antithesis of Sydney in the 1980s – I amplify sexual and cultural difference as my characters try to make sense of their artistic and sexual desires, whilst ruminating on recent sexual and travel experiences.

All of these stories, though set in the same few years in the 1980s, are written from different perspectives and express the views of the various speaking subjects, in a way that I hope reflects the contemporaneous attitudes of young Australians. As such, finding a suitable voice and tone for each speaking subject, whether that subject is a central character or narrator, has been a primary concern for me during the writing process. After experimenting with voice to achieve various degrees of distance and focalisation I found the third person voice the most flexible for this reflective writing project. Initially I wrote the fourth story in first person but as it didn't give me the scope or overview to depict such a myriad of characters (there are over ten) I re-wrote it in the third person. Helen Garner comments on her own anxiety about finding the right authorial voice:

I need to find a new 'I' that feels right. I can't rush this process. I can't force it. It's organic, instinctive. If I launch out by force with the wrong persona, I start after about three pages to feel phoney. I get lost. (2002, p.2)

In Garner's early works, her authorial voice shifts from the confidential 'I' of the diarist style of the first person voice of Nora

in *Monkey Grip*, to the ‘my’ as in ‘my friend’ dramatic first person voice in ‘The Life of Art’, to the closely attenuated third person voice directing the dialogue in *The Children’s Bach*. As well as finding the right voice, another of my central concerns is the creation of effective and emotive imagery. Garner’s ability to describe both the physical and interior worlds of characters is unparalleled. Hilary McPhee describes her eye for detail, as if “it is lit by an eerie slanted light” (2001, p.183). She also comments on Garner’s “idiosyncratic vision”, her “controlled lyricism”, her “sharp strange images and the dense rich texture their layering makes” (2001, p.244). As well as seeking to emulate Garner’s rendering of imagery, as well as her delineation of character, scene and mood, I also aspired to attain her knack for writing realistic dialogue.

In writing retrospectively about the 1980s, I found dialogue and imagery the most challenging aspects to represent in terms of authenticity. Owen Richardson has described *The Children’s Bach* as being “carried by dialogue and images of action” (1997, p.100). He also observes that “authorial commentary on the inner lives of her characters and the *meaning* of their actions is so skillfully and modestly woven into the text that it is as though the author has largely disappeared” (p.100). Perhaps this is in part due to the fact that, as Richardson goes on to point out, this novel is an example of the *shown* rather than *told* style of writing. This ability to show rather than tell is a skill that I have consciously tried to develop in my novella, partly because it is standard advice to aspiring writers, but also because it suits my filmic style of writing, which is also “carried by dialogue and images of action” (p.100).

In her essay “I” which discusses writing persona, Garner refers to writer’s block as a “painful state” that can “continue for years” but when considering what others perceive to be her “self–

exposure” as a writer, claims that she does not feel exposed because “the ‘I’ in the story is never completely me” (Garner, 2002, p.2). At the 2008 Sydney Writer’s Festival, in conversation with Caroline Baum, she describes anxiety as “residing in the verbs” and advises aspiring writers “not to clog the work” and to “leave room for the reader to come into the text” (2008), again reinforcing the idea of leaving, or creating, space within the narrative.

Roland Barthes, when considering a similar anxiety/dilemma associated with expressing the ‘I’ within amorous/erotic writing, states that language itself is an impediment to meaning. He posits that the writing subject is doubly coded; by his/her entry into language, and by the subject’s own experiences:

I cannot write myself. What, after all is this “I” who would write himself? Even as he would enter into the writing, the writing would take the wind out of his sails, would render him null and void...What obstructs amorous writing is the illusion of expressivity... What writing demands...is to sacrifice a little of his Image-repertoire, and to assume thereby, through his language, the assumption of a little reality. (1978, p. 98)

Besides the tone, the writer must consider what is implicit in the ‘I’ who speaks, what is conveyed, and whether or not the subject matter and the tone or language work together. While Garner has been praised for her ability to represent female concerns using a “legitimate authorial voice” (Goldsworthy, 1996, p.15), Peter Corris claimed that she, “has published her private journal rather than written a novel” (1977, p.12). Years later, in response to this criticism, Garner stated, “I did publish my diary. That’s exactly what I did. I left out what I thought were the boring bits, wrote bridging passages, and changed all the names” (cited in Daylight, 2012, p.18).

While Garner's response to Corris' criticism sounds blasé, she has often expressed strong views on the subject of authorial anxiety and the phoniness inherent within writing. Elspeth Probyn explains authorial anxiety:

The risk of writing is always that you will fail to engage readers. Disappointment in yourself looms large when you can't quite get the words right or get the argument across. Simply put, it's the challenge of making the writing equal to the subject being written about. (2010, p.72)

Probyn's dilemma is threefold: selection of language, construction of argument (or point of view) and how that point of view might be interpreted by a reader. She also posits that the writer may feel as a "sham in this gulf" (p.72). This 'in-betweenness' or gap exists between writer and subject, between theory and practice, between the subject and the unconscious and between the writer and their subject. To use the uneasy feeling of anxiety or 'shame' constructively, Probyn urges "the writer to return to the page with a renewed desire to do better" (p. 89).

Throughout this project I have experienced periods of authorial anxiety, usually concerned with the establishment of authentic voices. The way I have dealt with this is to resort to one of my enduring philosophies, one that coincidentally aligns with postcolonial theory; that is, if it is not working, shift the perspective. The other main anxiety that I have grappled with is determining when a piece of writing is actually finished. Realising that writing is always re-writing went some way towards alleviating this concern. I also considered whether I was telegraphing or giving too little information, whether my descriptions were necessary or superfluous, and if I was being overly indulgent or holding back on emotion. Leon Surmelian considers the anxiety of the reader by being attentive to the pace of the narrative structure:

Since summary favours a more detached spectator attitude, it may be used for giving the reader emotional relief when his nerves are frayed by the scenes. When a scene arouses too much anxiety, summary allays it. (1968, p.22)

I found this idea both illuminating and technically helpful. Giving the reader time to breathe, a pause in scenic action, also relates to Garner's comments about leaving "holes" and "space" for the reader to "come in" (1984, p, 131). Using summary as a pausing device in the narrative is also a way of gathering up loose threads that may not have been resolved in a dramatic or more mimetic scene.

In *Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes describes the 'semiotic modality' of the practice of writing as "a perpetual interweaving (text means tissue)" in which "the subject unmakes himself like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web" (1975, p.64). This denotes an unravelling, which in itself could be construed as a double anxiety: the successful (or not) unravelling of the narrative, as well as the literal unravelling of the author as in anxiety or exposure of emotional truths, secrets or revelations. This idea of 'life' intermingling with the author's 'autobiographical swatches' clearly expresses the interrelation of imagination (fiction) and memory, the memories being a series of 'swatches' that are woven through the narrative.

It also connotes a method for narrative construction, one in which all the threads need to come together. I have found this idea – that everything needs to tie in – particularly in compressed narratives, to be a paramount consideration throughout this writing project. Also, because of my semi-autobiographical engagement with this work, I have had to consider to what extent the 'material' for my novella, this assemblage of swatches and thirty year old memories interspersed with cultural and social research, has been rendered



unreliable. Though I remember what I was like, what I thought and what I did, I can no longer clearly differentiate between events and what time and/or, my subconscious have made of them. Nor do I know to what extent I have mythologised my experiences, the era, or myself. Surmelian claims that, “the perceptive writer searches for hidden meanings in human events and builds his stories around them” (1968, p.2). This explains the relationship between truth and fiction in my novella. Whilst I began with ‘true’ human events, that I considered to be meaningful and worthy of representation, I ended with a much more fictional group of narratives that evolved into ‘built’ stories.

It is interesting that while cultural and political events can be checked, my recollections cannot be validated (though perhaps they could be interpreted by psychoanalysis). This means that it is the imaginative part of narrative construction that needs verifying, even if that verification amounts to little more than researching popular culture. As Surmelian also reports, the use of the imagination in fiction “does no violence to reality” (1968, p.2). Comparing this to Virginia Woolf’s claim referred to at the start of this chapter, that the truer the facts the better the fiction, it would seem that the degree of truth and fiction in narrative is discretionary. The main issue it seems is if the fictive world is believable, not in terms of truth, but in terms of whether it has successfully engaged the reader.

The aerograms I found several years ago while moving house were the conduit I used to reconnect me with both the era and the characters that I wished to vivify in my novella. The language, subject matter and attempts at intellectual sophistication they contained were the threads that became the swatches that prompted my memory and, in turn, fuelled my imagination. In addition to my concern to use appropriate terminology, I consider language’s style and pace to be very important when writing

reflectively. It is easy to remember the feeling of a time or of an event, but recalling the specific details is another thing. To do as Garner did, and truly represent the contemporary, I argue that the tone, the language, and the dialogue, especially the slang, need to be accurate.

Considering the unconscious, Lacan claims that in entering language we become “a prey to desire” and that by entering a language that has been divided up, we are entering “that inaccessible realm which is always beyond the reach of signification, always outside the symbolic order” (cited in Eagleton, 1983, p.145). If the fictive world is derived from dreams and the subconscious (the opposite of factual writing), then the issue of authenticity seems almost a ruse. If my fiction does not have to contain facts, but rather has to host/engage/coerce my reader, it seems that it is much more dependent upon literary devices – such as style, tone, metaphor, symbolism and allegory – than it is its actual material or ‘content’. It would also seem that my memories are more ‘real’ than the fiction I augment them with to make the narrative flow, to make the text cohesive, to make it readable.

At times I wanted to include events from my past, ones that I considered might make interesting reading; but when I wrote them, though they were very true to me, they did not read true. In fact, they had such a false ring that I had to leave them out, which made me realise that what is traditionally considered essential in good narrative – drama, conflict, and resolution – did not always transcribe into interesting writing. A more successful piece of writing seemed to be more about how it made you feel: whether the narrative had created its own atmosphere, if it felt alive. But what does that mean? I propose that it is about connection, and that connection is helped by tone which seems a vital segue into trusting an author or any artist. As a reader I think it is the same –

we want to be taken to another realm – and it is up to the writer to provide the tone, the conduit by which the reader can enter such an intimate narrative space. Tone is a subtle, almost a psychic phenomenon, and influences whether we trust an artist, or refuse them. Whether we resonate with the psychic world of a writer or artist then, seems to depend on whether their language, myth and Image-repertoire have been transmitted in a way that engages us.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This Masters project evolved very differently from how I envisaged it would. Across the course of a few years of working on the novella, the voice and structure have altered considerably, although the original premise about a group of inter-related travel stories about young Australians abroad in the early 1980s has remained largely unchanged. The structure of the novella also adapted as I narrowed the focus by concentrating on the travel adventures of two main female characters, and linking them through the motif of their sexual encounters with a male motif character and his ex-girlfriend. In the course of writing and rewriting, some stories that I planned to include have been left out and characters that were originally minor became major, and vice versa. As a result of my research and close readings of recent Australian fiction, particularly that set in the 1980s, I have learnt that the voice and style of narrative is as important in conveying meaning and mood, if not more so, than the content.

In the exegesis the theme of desire developed as the most iterative component, linking the practice and research, making me reconsider and often change the position and attitudes of my speaking subjects. As both the novella and exegesis relied on reflection, many of the changes I made evolved simply as part of the process of writing, re-writing, refining and editing. Others, however, were informed by my research and close reading of Garner, such as the decision to alter the typical representation of the motif character, by making Vincent have an emotional breakdown.

Through the iteration of research and reflection I came to realise how complex a subject desire is – both in terms of its theoretical scope, and how elusive it can be to express. I chose the early

works of Helen Garner to analyse because of her use of voice, her expression of authenticity (both of character and era), and especially because of her focused interest in the intersection of desire and theory – or as she puts it, the “gap between theory and practice” (Garner, 1980, p.53).

Throughout this analysis it became evident that Garner and I shared similar interests in the theme of desire and the characters drawn from the era of Australian collective households. However, in order to portray a Sydney version of Garner’s young 1970s/1980s, Melbourne coterie, I needed to find my own distinct voice to delineate character, scene and era. Stylistically I have aspired to Garner’s knack of combining “economy and richness” and “the literal and the metaphoric” (Craven, 1985, p.214). Thematically, my key concerns have been how to express the female desiring subject, while authentically capturing the 1980s era through the lens of travel.

On reflection, although my generation (specifically those born on the baby-boomer/generation X cusp) thought we were radical, we owed a considerable legacy to the counter-culture and the political and cultural changes that had occurred in the late sixties and early seventies, particularly the Sydney Push. By the 1980s, with the first wave of the punk movement in its last throes, we mocked the idealism of both it and the hippy generation that preceded it, while basking in the naïveté and freedom these ideals had established. When I speak of representing a generation, of course I cannot speak on behalf of its entirety. I would locate my characters’ attitudinally as being similarly aligned with the philosophies of the existentialist Sydney Push movement that preceded them: “tough in a laconic fashion” and “opposed to the Church, the State, wowsers and censorship” (Coombs, 1996, pviii).

The female characters in my novella, like Garner's, considered themselves equal to men, both sexually and intellectually, and placed more importance on their sociosexual lives and creativity than on careers. As such, inequality between the sexes, both in the workplace and economically, were not of primary concern. This is arguably one of the shifts in attitude that identify this post-pill pre-AIDS era, a certain vagueness/naïveté as to the extent of the equality that had really been attained. It is this climate of real and perceived change that I, like Garner, have endeavoured to depict through my female desiring subjects.

By using travel as a narrative device to both shape my short stories and position the characters in reflective and challenging situations, I have sharpened my perspectives on identity and the Other. My aim was to take these characters out of their comfortable, collective households, and place them in situations where they could contemplate their own identity and sense of self as they confronted the Other. This exploration of the Other, rather than being about travel per se, is more specifically an examination of being *away* or *elsewhere*, as this was a common theme for young Australians in the 1980s.

Braidotti's description of the relationship between the intersection of theory and fiction sums up the concerns of this project:

I would much rather fictionalise my theories, theorise my fictions, and practice philosophy as a form of conceptual creativity. This style is attached to the collective project of feminism, which implies the acknowledgment and recognition of the voices of other women. (2011, p.67)

This statement links the iterative nature of the representation of ideas, emotions and political concerns within literature and art and theory. It also supports my argument that the best way to express the female desiring subject is through representing her

desires directly within fiction. As addressed earlier through theoretical frameworks drawn from Cixous, Kristeva and Kaplan, it is only in the articulation of female desire from the female point of view that the phallogentric bias of history will be undone.

The Sydney coterie I have represented enjoyed the freedoms established by the Whitlam government and then saw them taken away, as the hippy and punk movements gave way to the excesses of 1980s materialism. While Garner's fictive women hotly debated monogamy, by the mid to late eighties equality in the workplace had become a more pressing concern. The advent of contraception and abortion meant that women were free to have sex, choose defacto relationships over marriage, and have children outside of the traditional nuclear family model. What women still didn't have, however, were equal career opportunities and paid maternity leave. Each era represents subtle shifts in attitude and style, and as I depict a snapshot of young Sydney sidlers abroad in the early 1980s, I have tried to express these underlying trends.

Throughout this exegesis, while I have discussed theories of, desire, identity, and the Other, I have neglected to emphasise that my novella is also intended to be amusing. As well as attempting to capture the zeitgeist of the era it might also go some way towards filling a gap in the representation of Sydney's young creative types of the 1980s, when marriage was scorned, success wasn't measured in money and the future was for everyone.

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## **THINGS TO TALK ABOUT LATER**

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## Prologue

### *Not Really a Party*

On a cool October night in 1981 Julia comes out of the shower, tousling her freshly streaked blonde hair. From the stairwell of the crumbling Balmain terrace she can see three girls making themselves comfortable at her green Formica table. One of them, the prettiest, is already flirting with Vincent. Not that she cares! She and Vincent are longer an item!

Feeling faintly irritated she goes into her room, well Declan's room – the room Anna, *another* of Vincent's attractive female friends has been promised. Julia hates Declan's lumpy futon and pine furniture. She turns on her lava lamp and it blows, just like the heater and the kettle. She wants Vincent to hassle the real estate about the wiring, but he refuses, claiming that they are six weeks behind in the rent. Julia resents paying eighteen dollars a week for Declan's shithole, but the attic is twenty-five.

Who *are* those irritating girls? She thinks, as a series of shrill titters drown out the best song on her latest mixed tape. Feeling cross, Julia glances at herself in the dusty mirror, noticing for the first time, the trace of a furrow between her wide blue eyes. She decides she will dress up a little after all, and as she pads down the hall to retrieve Vincent's lamp, the girls go quiet. She can hear Vincent's confidential tone; he must be telling one of his stupid taxi stories – probably the one about politician's wife who invites him in for martinis. Damn! One of them has taken her tape off and put on Men at Work!

Descending from the attic, Anna catches Julia preening as she applies purple khol.

'Oh hi!'

'Nice skirt!'

'Oh thanks! Not too Madonna-ish?' Slightly embarrassed, Julia fluffs out the pink and black lacy layers.

‘A bit, but in a good way – it *is* a party!’

‘Not really!’ Julia says sulkily. ‘Is Therese coming?’

‘Think so. Did you hear that Declan is coming home early?’

Anna is tentative. She hadn’t wanted to pay the extra seven dollars for the attic; especially since Declan had promised she could have his room.

‘No, when?’ asks Julia.

‘This week I think!’ Anna half wished she’d stayed at Rozelle – living with three pilled out psych nurses had been depressing but it was only fifteen dollars a week, and they didn’t eat her food (they didn’t really eat any food).

‘Well I guess I’ll see you on the dance floor!’

‘Wait! Are you going to the bottle shop?’

‘No, isn’t there half a cask still!’ asks Anna.

‘No Vincent and I drank that. Want to go halves in one?’

The girls shrieked again. ‘God! They sound like total fuckwits. Do you *know* them?’ continues Julia.

‘Pretty sure they go to art school in Newcastle,’ says Anna.

‘Typical!’ Julia snorts.

‘Have *you* invited anyone?’ Anna hovers in the stairwell.

‘No. One of them is quite pretty isn’t she?’ muses Julia.

‘I haven’t seen them yet!’ laughs Anna. Just last night Vincent had described one of them as ‘gorgeous in a Deborah Harry kind of way’.

Julia, angling the mirror of the broken wardrobe, says, ‘I feel like going *out* now. Want to get a sambal at Satasia – or check out the Pismo?’

‘I can’t eat out.’

‘Why not?’

‘I have to pay off my parking tickets.’

‘How come?’

‘My mother gave the cops my address.’

‘What a bitch!’

‘I know!’



‘Do you think you could you get the Chateau burgundy I like?’  
Julia affects a sweet tone as she lights the end of a joint.

By the time Julia saunters downstairs, sliding her hand along the greasy handrail, more people have huddled around her kitchen table, but nobody, except Vincent’s friend, Dan, seems to have noticed her entrance. Slightly red-faced, he beams at her. She smiles back, mainly to annoy Vincent, who is rolling one of his esteemed three paper joints. Meanwhile Anna has arrived with Therese, who she must have run into at the bottle shop. Therese is wearing an emerald green sloppy Joe. She has cut the neck out and it gapes, revealing her smooth upper arms. Her earrings dangle and scrape. On one she has attached a pair of dice and on the other a small plastic lion. According to Vincent she and Anna don’t know each other very well, but they appear to get on. Therese is going overseas as soon as she’s saved her fare to Japan.

Five hours later, the house is full of people, most of them drunk and stoned and dancing to Julia’s new tape. Anna and Therese are sharing a can of UDL, affecting concerned expressions as Julia once more explains, ‘Vincent and I are still *really* good friends, we’re just not sleeping together!’

## Elegant Chopsticks

The Ginza Star is one of Tokyo's oldest and most prestigious clubs, and the only reason I'm working here is because it's fashionable these days to have a *gaijin* or two among the Japanese girls. Except for Asuka, they could be women – their ages like their opinions are hidden. I'm treating it as a kind of exotic, free finishing school, whilst I save my airfare to London. Hotels in Tokyo are a lot dearer than I'd anticipated and I have to confess that after three days of not speaking a word of English I did what I swore I'd never do – called a friend of a friend. Paula was very friendly and invited me to her family home (well, her parents): an expansive apartment that covers the entire top floor of a glamorous block in downtown Shibuya. As 'luck would have it' her parents are 'on the continent' so guess where I'm now holed up? Anyway, the advertisement in the Tokyo Times reads:

'Evening Wear Requiring  
Movie-Star Looks'

I have only three outfits that are in-keeping with the dress code and will have to expand on these if my one-month probationary contract is to be extended. Tonight I'm wearing my blue fifties dress and red stilettos. I leave the cold dark street and apply make-up on my way up to the twenty-seventh floor – the fluorescents in the lift cast a most unflattering light.

Most of the hostesses are still seated near the bar, whitening their faces, as they chat with Haru the barman – probably about last night's tips. He looks up from rolling the warm hand towels to gives me a cursory nod, then continues singing along with Lionel Ritchie's, *All Night Long* on NHK radio. Even though he speaks English he prefers not to. The Hello Kitty alarm beeps at ten to seven and the flurry commences. Mizuki, our chief hostess, turns on the paper lanterns and Kabuki music. Sachi lights incense to disguise the

persistent odour from a nearby kitchen and Haru sets up the whiskey trays and dims the main lights. Minutes later Mamasan's doorbells chime and the show begins.

*'Irrashaimasse!'* we welcome our first guests, the enthusiastic Mr Yamamoto and his American guest, Mr Bradley Williams. Mizuki seats me between the two gentlemen. While they are talking business Mizuki, Sachi and I make name cards and attempt a little conversation. Mizuki and Sachi can't be much older than me, even though their poise and elegance suggest otherwise – I'm attempting to emulate some of their refinements. It really is hard to imagine why they idolise us so. I feel so clumsy, so large, by comparison. As Mizuki tells me my dress is *kawaii*, I notice a small white patch on the shoulder of her kimono. Sachi passes me one of the numerous hand towels and whispers, *'aachen'*.

Mr Yamamoto requires our attention again and as Mizuki and Sachi have done all the work with our clients so far, I decide it's time I join in. I begin my hapless Westerner routine – by attempting to make an origami-esque, chopstick rest. Mizuki and Sachi know it by heart. With their chopsticks poised perfectly, they laugh as my first attempt collapses. I then follow Mizuki's deft fingers again – as, in three simple moves, she creates another perfect rest. My fingers feel thick and stubby as one of the elegant chopsticks slides to the floor. I crumple the rice paper into a ball, feigning exasperation. As Mr Yamamoto's shrill song ends, he picks up the chopstick, relieved to be passing on the microphone, and patiently demonstrates *his* version of the 'rest' routine. This time I make a reasonable one and everybody claps, especially Mr Yamamoto.

The customary clapping for the slightest thing is one of the things I find most difficult about the job. For instance, right now I think my weak clapping could be the reason Mizuki is giving me that look. I respond with a puzzled half-smile, as I watch her gaze shift toward the *shoji* screens. The clapping gives way to silence, and then an ominous rustle – as Mamasan, resplendent in an emerald green, *new style* hostess suit – descends from her upstairs parlour. I uncross

my legs. She sashays towards our table and formally greets us, (her girls), ‘*Konbanwa!*’

We rise, returning the extended version, ‘*Youkoso irasshai mashita!*’ The usual bowing continues as Mamasan’s attention shifts to the gentlemen. She locks eyes with them, tossing her coiffed head, her lips parting to reveal red lipstick on a tiny front tooth. She looks a little tired, our seductress, our maître d’. I see a glimpse of the timid girl she must have been; pretty, a little conniving.

She squeezes in between Mr Yamamoto and Mr Williams. Even though she has a bit of a tummy, she is still shapely. She is going to expect me to sing tonight, I’m sure. I’ve dodged the microphone more times than is reasonable this week. Oh here we go. Just as I’m hoping Carlos, Paula’s Mexican academic friend will visit later tonight, Mr Yamamoto cheers,

‘You country song Therese-san!’, proud of his one English phrase, which he yells straight into my ear.

Mizuki claps, gently correcting him, ‘Song from your country!’

The other girls – except Asuka, who has just arrived wearing a short red cocktail dress – join in, ‘*Hai, hai*, Therese-san, song from your country!’

I go through the ritual of trying to find a new song. I’m sure if I sing the one Mr Yamamoto wants, the one I’ve been singing all month, Mr Williams will be amused. Sachi reverently passes me the plastic folder opened to the *gaijin* selection page. I refuse to sing the two awful Australian songs and resort to what is really the American section, with a few Beatles hits. There’s a Japanese song I could almost manage, but I’m not sure if it would be a novelty or cause offence. Perhaps later! I’ve now dawdled for so long with the songbook that the Kabuki is playing again and everyone’s happily chatting.

I pick up the ice tongs. Ice tongs are another part of the ceremony. After daintily removing the lid of the canister, I select the cubes carefully – two or three at a time is best – before submerging

them ‘just so’ into the tumblers. Mizuki smiles as my ice cubes plop perfectly into each glass. About as much ice as whisky and then a little top up, just for good measure. The warmth and gaiety develop with every new round of plopping and topping. Mr Yamamoto notices my glass is empty and refills it.

We girls all nurse our *Suntory*. This is another art I’m learning – one I find quite difficult. The girls laugh uproariously. Mr Williams has just made a joke about his recent visit to a bathhouse. Mizuki and Sachis’ giggling crescendos – as Mamasan does an impression of a *gaijin* jumping out of a Japanese bath. I smile at Mr Williams but he looks away – we are both embarrassed to be at each other’s table. I take a swig of the whiskey, instead of a sip and upbraid myself. Asuka continues staring into space. It’s a shame Paula has told me she fancies Carlos – he’s cute and rather interesting. And a Marxist!

The prevailing hilarity provides me with the opportunity to slip out. The five-hour shifts go so slowly sometimes that I, a non-smoker, have taken to ducking out the back for a ‘Mild Seven’. Almost everybody smokes, which makes me think that perhaps I should sing *Cigarettes and Whisky and Wild, Wild Women*. That’s my idea of Karaoke. I can hear Mr Williams’ tentative chuckling. He’s quite typical of the *gaijin* gentlemen – shy to begin with. After a while though, once they’ve gotten to like the new, more respected version of themselves, perhaps even acquired a taste for the microphone (singing at The Star is enough to give even the most reticent a taste for the bright lights) they can become quite animated. Their inhibitions usually wane just as the gentlemen develop a rapport with one of the girls – such beauties with their silken hair and unreadable eyes. Often it’s Mizuki. She has that special way of cocking her delicate head and expressing sudden delight that the gentleman in question could easily be forgiven for feeling it is the first time he has been truly understood.

Someone is coming! I stub out the cigarette in the antique vase and dash into the bathroom. From inside the cubicle I hear the

familiar flick of the Zippo lighter – Mamasan doesn't like to be seen smoking by her clients. I smudge on some lipstick and come out smoothing my hair. Mamasan eyes me suspiciously, we're allowed one cigarette break but not before nine. I grimace slightly and touch my stomach, implying 'women's trouble', before slinking back to my table.

When I sit next to Mizuki, I realise that it is really she that runs the Ginza Star. I watch her as she helps Sachi and Kobe set up a table for a new group of guests. Sensitive to the slightest ripple, the tiniest gap in hilarity, she now has the added responsibility of tempering Mamasan's newest hostess, Asuka. Even though I'm relieved the attention has shifted to her, I'm still aware of the tenuous nature of my own position. Mr Yamamoto is talking to Mamasan, no doubt requesting Asuka. Asuka, so different from the other girls, with her smouldering resentment and abrupt modernity shoots me a disdainful look. No doubt she's unimpressed by my second-hand dress.

A certain client, Mr Tengo, fancies that I look like Marilyn Monroe in it. A lovely thought, but considering I have dark hair and Jane Russell is the only actress I've ever been likened to, I wonder if he is having a little joke with me. Speak of the devil – he's just walked in. He totters towards me and I trill, '*Irrashaimasse, Konbanwe!*'

'Goodnight you, Therese!' he replies, doing a succession of miniature bows. He fancies that he speaks particularly good English when in my company. The fact that I will be excused from singing at the American's table if he requests me is some consolation. Except tonight is Wednesday, David Carradine's night, and I was looking forward to joining him in the velvet club lounge. He is tall and glamorous, and speaks English and if he invited me back to his hotel I'd probably say yes. I groan when I see that Mr Tengo has brought his very drunk, very fat friend, Mr Tanaka. Never mind! Mr Tanaka talks and laughs and stares at me until I say '*hai, hai!*' after which he explodes into laughter. Mr Tengo, however, is another

story. An earnest man with bad breath, he is studying Business English in Shibuya. I don't tell him or anyone else at the club that by day I'm teaching at The Nancy School of English just down the road. He comes to The Star most evenings after completing a ten-hour day at the office and often a two-hour English lesson, after which he presumably goes home to his very good wife and promising children.

I usually just talk in the spaces when he pauses. I've recently added a few new emphatic phrases such as *honto* and *so deska*, to alternate with *hai*. Mr Tengo is delighted but is really more in the business of speaking Business English. I also say, 'Very good English, Mr Tengo!' as often as I can. This makes him blush and hopefully makes my job a little more secure; especially if I can manage to say it as Mamasan slithers by.

Mr Tengo is looking seriously at Mr Tanaka, perhaps a deal has been struck. Although seemingly the dimmer of the two, Mr Tanaka must be the superior because Mr Tengo always defers to him, even letting him sing his favourite song. Now two tables are full of frivolity and many more gentlemen are arriving. Mamasan relaxes. The till is ringing and The Star is living up to its reputation.

The problem with being stuck with Mr Tengo and Mr Tanaka is, apart from Mr Tengo's breath, that the very drunk Mr Tanaka has wandering hands. This club is one of the top clubs in Ginza, with visitors from all over the world, so it really doesn't have to put up with this behaviour. If one of the girls is having this kind of a problem, the correct thing to do is to call Mamasan, but even I know that Mamasan prefers us to turn a blind eye. I don't want to be any trouble because there are a lot of girls like me; wishing to work in such a top club, many with 'movie star looks' far superior to mine, *and*, I haven't even begun to save for my airfare to London, or any place else for that matter.

I cough to get Mizuki's attention. She knows the problem of the wandering hands well and rises gracefully, bowing to her new clients, before gliding across to help me with Mr Tanaka. Crinkling her perfect eyebrows she gives him a faux cross look, like a loving

and patient mother, before gently placing his pudgy hands on the microphone. He pretends he doesn't want to sing, but when she sings the chorus it is as much as he can do not to snatch the microphone from her. Mr Tengo smiles and pats his damp forehead with one of Haru's hand towels.

Mamasan looks on, nodding as if she has orchestrated the correction. Decorum has been re-established. While Mr Tanaka sings, Mamasan comes to have a word with Mr Tengo. He says '*hai, hai, hai!*' nodding his head emphatically and agrees to order expensive champagne and delicacies from Palace House Sushi. Asuka overhears him and throws me an irritated glance. Her eyes glaze over as Mr Yamamoto talks. When he offers her *endamame* she declines. She is obliged to stay with him; he is a good steady client, but cannot afford what Mr Tengo can.

All of a sudden, Asuka dances boldly across to our table. Even I wince at her faux pas. The shock waves that ripple through the club are so strong I wonder if there's another earthquake. When she offers Mr Tengo the microphone Mr Tanaka stops talking to leer at her. She's more voluptuous than the others and her sullen manner is alluring. All eyes follow her as she sits next to Mr Tanaka and boldly tops up his champagne, tossing her head a little like Mamasan, before sipping, uninvited, from his glass. Mizuki and Mr Tengo share a worried look. He has already had to buy the very expensive champagne and assure Mamasan that Mr Tanaka's hands will not wander again.

Mr Tengo is also very concerned about the bill. He's fairly sure the volatile Mr Tanaka will pay but as he is much drunker than usual he could, if displeased, storm out. Mr Tengo also knows that Mr Tanaka has a penchant for some of the less prestigious clubs closer to his home. I watch Mr Tengo clasp and unclasp his sweaty hands. Mamasan sits next to Asuka and whispers in her ear – even though it's obvious she'd rather be clipping her round the ear. Asuka picks up the ice bucket and tongs, her face stony. Mamasan offers the tray of delicacies, first to the gentlemen and then to me. I take the



smallest of the seared scallops. The flavour is delicate, a hint of ginger, and like Asuka, I could easily devour the whole plate. Even the hostesses still waiting in the lounge area, turn their heads, teased by the aroma. It's not that Mamasan starves us girls. She provides nuts, *endaname* and occasionally *gyozo*. It's just that the food from The Palace House Sushi is in a class of its own.

Asuka refuses to return to Mr Yamamoto's table. Even I understand what Mamasan has just said. She ignores her, sliding the largest piece of glistening salmon into her mouth. I watch, impressed by her audacity. Mr Tanaka, still jovial, is being clapped to do another song. As he tries to stand he falls over. Everyone laughs. Such a good time is being had. It's not long however, before he can't resist getting his *sashimi*-sticky hands on Asuka. Mr Tengo watches anxiously. Asuka seems content to ignore his groping while she helps herself to more of the *sashimi*. As Mamasan momentarily leaves to greet a group of even more important businessmen, Asuka selects the largest of the *tempura* prawns. I watch Mizuki pick up the fast diminishing platter and offer it to Mr Tengo. He is too pre-occupied to eat, but insists I try the 'special' *sushi*. I eat slowly and deliberately, just like Mizuki.

The doorbell chimes. It's Mr Carradine, looking dashing in his cream linen suit. As he saunters in I smile but only Mizuki notices. He walks past us and she whispers, '*kawaii* Therese-san' and for my eyes only, performs a mini kung-fu chop under the table. Now it's my turn to blush. Asuka, sensing a distraction, leans across to take another piece of *tempura*, but Mizuki deftly moves the platter out of her reach. Shrugging, Asuka drains Mr Tanaka's champagne instead. He laughs, refills his glass and raises it to her lips. As she tips her head back to swallow he claps. While all eyes are on Asuka and Mr Tanaka, Mizuki and I slide the last pieces of *tempura* onto a napkin for later. The Star is full to capacity.

Since the platter is demolished, Asuka unceremoniously places Mr Tanaka's hand back on the table causing his choler to rise dramatically. Mr Tengo looks like he's about to cry. Mamasan is

watching from the bar. Poor Mizuki, she really has her work cut out for her tonight. She looks tired, sighs, and as she glances back towards Mr Yamamoto's table, intimates that the situation there is even worse. I turn around. Mr Yamamoto is crestfallen. Mr Williams has grown silent and Kobe, their replacement hostess, is distressed, unable to amuse either gentleman. Mizuki taps Asuka on the shoulder, and then exerts the slightest pressure on her wrist as she leads her out through the *shoji* screens. I go to assist Kobe.

Mr Yamamoto's self-esteem is partially restored, now that he is seated between two *gaijins* again, speaking English. I try to convey to Mr Williams that more care must be taken with Mr Yamamoto's feelings, but Mr Williams isn't sensitive and doesn't know the first thing about pretending to understand Mr Yamamoto's English. I plop ice into Mr Yamamoto's glass, straighten his coaster, and say, 'Okay Mr Yamamoto let's talk Business English!' He perks up a little and resumes chatting with me in fluent Japanese. I slide a crooked rest under his dislodged chopstick and pour some of Mamasan's 'special' *sake*. He claps and with a concentrated effort says, '*Kawaii* Marilyn Monroe!' Mamasan almost smiles at me. Mr Williams looks confused and when I explain, he laughs. I decide to take advantage of his sudden lightness of mood and ask him if he'll do a song. Of course he won't – he's not that drunk – or obliging. Oh no! Now Mr Yamamoto is passing me the microphone. Why doesn't he insist Asuka accompany him to the velvet club lounge as arranged? I pick up the plastic songbook and flick through it again. Surely there's a song I've missed.

Mr Tengo chimes in from the other table, 'Song from your country! Song from your country!' Even Mr Tananka knows the chant. His voice booms and they all clap. If I was still at Mr Tengo's table I would say, 'Very good English Mr Tengo!' I mouth the words and he smiles proudly. I do a reasonable version of *Big Spender*, but they're unimpressed. They chant again, 'Song from your country Therese-san!'

Mr Yamamoto stands, passing me back the microphone I've prematurely laid on the table. He bows and all of a sudden – you could hear a chopstick drop – 'Please Therese-san, song from your country!' There's no getting out of it. This is the best sentence I've heard him construct so far. I'm almost touched. I do a blistering rendition of *Country Roads Take Me Home*.

Mr Yamamoto and Mr Tengo both have tears in their eyes and the others clap and cheer in delight, still singing the chorus they have come to know and love. I shrug off my embarrassment as the grinning Mr Bradley Williams bows and refills my *Suntory*.

Mr Yamamoto and Mr Tengo have a microphone each now and are going to sing the John Denver classic again. Asuka, against all advice, is demolishing Mr Yamamoto's *Sushi box* in the velvet club lounge and making eyes at Mr Carradine.

Kobe, who is making an origami bear, stops to look at me, and claps. I have been fiddling with the crumpled rice paper and have absent-mindedly produced a perfect rest.

## On Reception

‘She’s coming!’ says Anna alerting the others. She can’t see any of them but she can hear doors opening and closing, and a suppressed giggle – no, it’s more like a snigger as Miss Josie Timmons, the owner of ‘Kent’s Relaxation Centre’ lumbers in wearing her usual bally brown cardigan. Her panting is accusative. Why hasn’t anyone dashed over to relieve her of the laundry that’s piled so high it’s grazing her double chin? She must be one of the richest, women north of the Thames, thinks Anna, jumping to her assistance. After placing the towels in the storeroom, she returns to the front desk but is unable to manoeuvre around Josie who is glaring at the ledger, her cardigan riding up at the back to reveal slack greyish drawers. Anna who has a penchant for buying clothes she can’t afford is at a loss to understand why a woman of Josie’s means dresses so.

As usual Josie’s face is screwed up in a suspicious scowl. This seems to be her set point, unless it’s been an unusually busy night – one lucrative enough to relax her square jaw and unfurl her surprisingly still thick eyebrows. She must be the wrong side of sixty, thinks Anna, resuming her position at the desk. Aware of Josie’s scrutiny she tries for the right tone ‘Good evening Mrs Timmons! How are you?’ Her voice rings tinny. The ‘good evening’ sounds droll, the ‘how are you?’ insolent.

‘Been busy?’ Josie is annoyed to have to talk, preferring to fixate on the ledger. Early on in the evening Anna has had to cross out one of Ruby’s entries and now it seems that Josie may think she’s been fudging the books. She’s already sacked three receptionists in as much as nine months, a point she’s mentioned to Anna on several occasions. Josie is of the opinion that Australians are good workers, well compared to the English at least. Besides Anna, there are three Australian girls working at her various establishments: two at Finsbury Park and Tahlula, (aka Dianne)

Anna's friend who has recently been relocated to Chalk Farm. Having spent most of the annual scholarship she receives to attend 'The Slade' Dianne is 'supplementing' it by working for Josie. Although Anna was a little hesitant to take up the receptionist position, Dianne assured her that the pay would be more than double she'd get elsewhere.

Dianne who is *not* on reception, of course earns much more. Even though Anna is intrigued by Dianne's blasé approach to her new and lucrative line of work she tries not to let on. In turn, Dianne relishes Anna's curiosity, revelling in Anna's perception of her as the more worldly of the two. Anna, who has been 'requested' by several of the clients already, shrugs off their offers, much to the amusement of the other girls.

Josie clicks her tongue, a bubble of saliva collecting in the corner of her mouth. She is literally breathing down Anna's neck as she moans about the lack of bookings. Now Anna feels so uncomfortable that she begins to think it might actually be preferable to be secreted away to one of the 'private quarters'. Which would she choose? The exotic eastern is a little shabby, (Danny, Josie's security-cum-handyman, still hasn't repaired the slats on the shoji screens), and Anna knows she's not cute enough for the schoolgirl suite, which only leaves 'The Hollywood'. Though a little obvious, at least the lighting is dim. Josie says it's the little details that set her establishments apart from the rest.

'What's this?' Josie has snatched the ledger and must be staring at Ruby's column, with the scrawled cancellation.

'Oh you know Eddie?' Anna's voice rises on the 'Eddie' so much that even she begins to think she might be lying.

'What about him?'

'Well he booked Ruby, even though she was with another couple of...'

'Yes?'

'Well he said he'd wait, because he only wanted...'

'Go on, I don't have all night.'

‘Well, he asked if he could make a call, then became quite edgy. When he asked why she was taking so long I did suggest he try Donatella... but...’

‘Oh get on with it!’

‘Well then a man, his boss I think, came in and he seemed even more agitated, so when he asked for a refund I just thought...’

‘His boss!’ She chortled. ‘More like his bookie!’ Josie’s amusement was short-lived. She scanned the book again. ‘Donatella, Tiffany and Lola were all free, why didn’t you book one of them?’

‘I know, I mean I tried but he only wanted Ruby.’

‘He only wanted Ruby!’ Josie parodies Anna’s voice making it sound wheedling. Anna, whose voice is so deep, it is occasionally mistaken for a man’s, is taken aback.

Josie continues, ‘Next *time* – if you want to keep this job, the punter goes with another girl, and if they won’t, *never* give my money back. For all I know you’ve nicked it.’

Anna was surprised that Josie didn’t realise she was far too terrified of her to pull such a stunt.

‘I’ll have to take it out of your pay!’ she says, pushing past Anna as she grabs a thick wad of pound notes from the drawer. Josie is hefty, and the desk shudders, the drawer grazing the side of Anna’s hip as she slams it shut. Anna winces but doesn’t make a sound.

Nancy, Josie’s handmaid, is watching from the Hollywood room, and imitates Josie’s stomping demeanour and scowling expression as Josie darts past to the bathroom. She is avoiding her as all the girls, except Ruby, do. Anna can’t fathom Ruby; a pretty slip of an Indian girl, impeccably turned out in a crisp, cotton sari who could just as easily be being ferried to violin lessons as here. Her mother, most often dressed in silk and gold, waits outside, her maroon Triumph purring patiently until Ruby is once again safely ensconced in its bucket seat. It occurs to Anna, just fleetingly, that the mother might not understand where she delivers her daughter six days a week. When she mentions this to Nancy (she immediately

wishes she hadn't) because Nancy who is not at all patronising, ruffles Anna's hair affectionately and looks into her eyes as if she's an adorable fool.

Josie calls out to Nancy from the bathroom, 'Who used all the bubble bath? Why isn't this cupboard locked?'

Nancy, again mimicking Josie's stomping, mouths, 'Up your twat you stupid old bat'.

Anna would think Nancy funnier were she not calculating how little pay she'll be going home with by the time she's forked out for the service Eddie hasn't received. Josie has already neglected to pay her the 'premium rate' when she stays after ten, which seems to be most evenings. And she can hardly tell Eddie who comes most nights that he owes her. Her first two weeks wages have cleared her debts and she was looking forward to spending this week's at The Body Map. She wonders if she should have hung onto a couple of shifts at the Wholly Grain after all. Though it was tedious knocking out trays of vegetarian stodge, the sweaty manager, Matt, would usually slip off to the gym as soon as lunch was over and she would be left to her own devices.

Josie now has Nancy bailed up in the hall and as she sprays her favourite musk aerosol into the hall, begins banging on about the laundry powder. Anna shoots Nancy a sympathetic look while Josie's broad beam is turned to her. Nancy has been working for Josie for over thirty years and though she still has a few loyal customers: well, Teddy Jenkins once a week and Rory from Cork occasionally, she isn't really getting any new business. Anna initially thought the fact that Josie let Nancy stay on, might have meant that she had a softer side, a notion she quickly dispelled when she realised just how indispensable to Josie, Nancy is. Apart from her intricate knowledge of the business and her unflappable good humour, Nancy also cleans her Tower Hamlets flat, with its partial view of the Thames.

When inclined Nancy will occasionally eke out a few 'trade secrets' to Anna. Just last week, for example, when the very

voluptuous Delilah was brought in to cover one of Tiffany's shifts (Tiffany had scored an 'all expenses' to Benidorm) Nancy had crept up behind Anna, poked her in the back and whispered, 'See now that's what I call a "melting moment!"' just as Anna was suggesting Delilah for Fernando, an elderly Italian gentleman of equally large proportions.

This was only Anna's fourth week at Kent's and even though she *was* earning double what she could anywhere else she was really beginning to wonder if the extra money, if she even got it, was worth it. As well as being brutal, Josie appeared to have an arsenal of 'associates' that owed her favours. And here she was back from the storeroom and bitching about the amount of towels being used.

'Health department's been doing the rounds Mrs Timmons!' Nancy was no fool; the mere mention of authorities was usually enough to keep Josie at bay. 'And er... there may have been an incident with one of the old boys – the mechanic's father...'

Josie scowled shoving a squashed cream bun into her mouth. After dumping the pile of old towels she'd rustled up at the front desk, Nancy followed Josie out to her only extravagance, her lilac Jaguar. 'Yes, Mrs Timmons, of course, I know!'

Tiffany and Delilah had come out to make a cup of tea, but soon made themselves scarce, when, through the venetians, they spied Josie stomping back in with Nancy, who was close at her heels and making theatrical throat slitting motions. It unnerved Anna how brazenly Nancy parodied Josie. Back at the counter again, Josie was once again refuting the discrepancy between the amount of towels used and the entries in the ledger. Nancy knew it wasn't really about the towels; she'd spied her counting rolls of cash in the front seat of the Jag, and she also knew (well she was pretty sure) that none of the girls at Kent's were ripping her off, not that she cared. Nancy glanced at Anna as if to say, 'here we go', cleared her throat, and began, 'Josie, I didn't want to worry you with this but the er incident with the mechanic, it could have been quite serious. They'd been at the races all day, so as you can imagine, they were plastered and



when the father threw up; well that set Trevor off – and he got so queasy – he passed out and hit his head on the vanity. So we weren't thinking about the towels – there was blood everywhere!' Nancy looked at Anna, 'Weren't pretty, were it Anna?'

Anna looked up, nodding seriously, wincing when Nancy winked – not at all convinced that Josie, whose eyes were boring into hers, couldn't see her. Nancy continued, 'And even though Trevor's only in his sixties, he's not a well man; dodgy ticker 'parently. And they didn't want Trevor's son involved, cos of the restraining order. Then when he started panicking, threatening to call an ambulance, I said, 'No! Why don't we just clean you up!'

'No ambulances! Absolutely Nancy!' Josie, forthright, was beginning to come round.

'No the old geezer didn't want one neither – so, with a *lot* of towels, we managed to mop up the blood. That was when I called Danny.'

Nancy prompted Anna who nodded gravely, just as the doorbell rang. Anna was unsure whether she should answer it, Josie sometimes liked to greet her clients – not this time though it seemed – Josie glared at her and she dashed to the door. Another of Ruby's clients, a young man in a duffle coat, shuffled in and when Anna explained that Ruby would be at least an hour, he settled good naturedly into the complimentary *Daily Mail*. Not easily distracted, Josie called Anna away from the front desk in order to continue the inquisition. Not remembering much other than that the girls had been taking the piss out of Trevor and his father in the tearoom, Anna said, 'Yes, I've never seen so much blood.'

Then the doorbell rang again and Josie cut Anna off, 'Okay, okay!' This time, with her grey vinyl handbag tucked under her arm, she did deign to greet the hefty but nervous man in paint stained overalls, leaving Anna standing foolishly at attention beside the front desk.

After escorting Josie to her car again, Nancy stood chuckling as she watched Josie speed off, her brown bally cardigan trailing out the door of the Jaguar.

Even mouthing ‘fucking bitch’ as she came back inside, for sixty-odd, Nancy was still very pretty. A nervous man in the waiting room looked awkwardly at Nancy and then at Anna who smiled insipidly – enough to put him at his ease, but not to interest him. (Anna was coming to realise that it didn’t take much.)

Now that Josie had left and the girls were beginning to saunter back to the tearoom, Anna noticed another customer, one she hadn’t seen before; slip furtively out the back. She checked the ledger to see if he’d paid Nancy. Tiffany was sprawled on the only couch moaning about her boyfriend again and the others were half listening as they tried on a new range of leatherwear that one of the hawkers had left for their perusal.

‘What does that geezer want for ‘em?’ Danielle had managed to squeeze into a red skirt that was really tight but did look good in a jaunty kind of way.

‘He said he’ll do you a deal. Has to go to Belfast to visit his mum and needs cash, two for the price of one, I think.’ Anna said.

‘Generous! More likely has to pay his solicitor. I’ll have this one and the blue one then. Don’t tell Bobby though or he’ll go bloody mad. Bobby, Danielle’s boyfriend, was tall and dopey looking with ginger rasta plaits that trailed half way down his back, and picked Danielle up so religiously at the end of her shift, you could have been mistaken for thinking he was her pimp. Josie hated him hanging around so if he saw the Jag he’d park down the road till she left, but on nights like tonight, when she’d been early to fetch the money, he’d come inside, usually have a warm can of special brew, and moon about until Danielle was finished. Occasionally, (Nancy reckoned it was only if he was in the doghouse), he’d bring Danielle a Babysham.

Danielle thought he was a bit of a catch and would become most displeased if the other girls gave him as much as a sideways

glance. She must have phoned Bobby to give him the 'all-clear' because Anna could see smoke billowing out of the old Hillman. When Anna called out to Danielle that he was parked out the back, she yelled back, 'I know I can smell him from 'ere!' Then, trying to squeeze into a pair of aqua leather pants, she stuck her head out of the tearoom and asked Anna if the old bat had been to collect the money yet.

'Yep!' Nancy chimed in, 'She should be hoeing into her Cornish pasties and brandy by now.'

'Did she leave our pay?' Tiffany seemed a little anxious.

Anna retrieved the envelopes, scrawled with Josie's spidery handwriting from the desk drawer and passed them over. Danielle counted out about two hundred pounds, stashed half in her bra and placed the rest in her handbag, just as Bobby sauntered in. He kissed her, grabbing her from behind and as she wiggled back into the red skirt she minced 'What do think?'

'How much is it?'

'Half a blow job, what's it to you tight-arse?'

'You're the one with the tight arse!'

Nancy and Tiffany exchanged glances, surprised that Bobby had made a joke. Then, more his old self, he mumbled, 'Can I've a tenner, I need smokes.' Danielle gave him an admonishing look but passed him a twenty as the others rolled their eyes. Business as usual!

It was the in-between time when the girls could afford to relax a little, perhaps send Bobby to pick up a few Jamaican patties or some Indian, even though they said Indian made them look fat for the late shift, but as Tiffany said, 'Who cares if my stomach sticks out; they're all pissed anyway!' Danielle, who didn't like the others being so confidential when Bobby was around, shot Tiffany a look.

'Gee's Danielle lighten up!' Tiffany replied, lighting a joint off Bobby's cigarette.

If this lull went on too long, the girls would get edgy, especially if it had been quiet earlier. Tired, they would hang out for

the last shift, the worst but often the most lucrative, after the pubs closed. If there were no punters Bobby was free to hang around, if there were, he'd pick the girls up some food and make himself scarce.

'Give us a fag then?' Danielle was flirting with him, sitting on his knee and sipping his beer, declining a drag on his six-rizzla joint. Anna couldn't decide if she was naïve or just a bit stupid as she watched her seduce the boyfriend who was clearly hers for the keeping.

Ruby came out of her room as a sleazy (even for Kent's), looking guy slipped out the front door. Anna hadn't liked the look of him at all and had avoided making eye contact with him as he'd waited a full hour for Ruby, rolling his worry beads and making impatient sniffing sounds all the while. She was surprised the other girls were so tolerant of Ruby's indisputable supremacy, supposing they'd learnt to accept that in this industry, youth prevailed.

The end of the evening passed unremarkably. Danielle and Bobby gave Tiffany a lift home, Nancy left with more laundry and as it was payday, Ruby's mother came inside to pick up her daughter; who'd just changed into a fresh apple green sari and was looking particularly radiant, glancing demurely as her mother hovered impatiently, waiting to receive their ample stipend.

Dianne popped in after her shift at Finsbury Park and seemingly at a bit of a loose end, convinced Anna, who was tired and somewhat reluctant, to go for a nightcap at the 'Stag's Head'. Linking arms as they walked out into the brisk night Dianne grumbled about her poor takings. She began to fantasise about the prospect of a lucrative 'one nighter', one that would set her up – dinner with the sheik, a quick romp in a five star hotel, then – easy street. Anna looked dubious but Dianne insisted her friend Janine had a friend, who'd pulled it off. Twenty thousand pounds in two hours at 'The Ritz' and that was back in 1979.

'So where do we find them then, these sheiks?' said Anna.

'Dunno, but not at Josie's!'

They ordered drinks and as they began to discuss their night, Anna telling Dianne how Josie had taken half her pay, and how she doubted she'd continue working there, she noticed that Dianne had grown pensive. Usually she would unwind with a vodka, lime and soda, and begin joking about one of the clients, without giving *too* much away of course.

'I really don't know how you do it!' declared Anna.

Dianne looked offended and said, 'You should try it sometime – it's no worse than half the times I've done it for free.'

'I suppose!' Dianne had a knack of making Anna feel, if not stupid, naïve. 'I just find it depressing, the place I mean, and Josie. Did you know that Ruby's mother *actually* drops her off and picks her up?'

'Yep!' Dianne was droll.

'How do you think Ruby feels about it?'

'The other girls hate her.'

'I know. But why, she's just a kid?'

'Haven't you ever wondered why she makes three times what the rest of us do?'

'Well it's pretty obvious; she's so young, and she's exotic...'

'*And* she lets them do *anything*!'

'What do you mean?'

'Anna!'

'Oh!' Anna still wasn't *exactly* sure what they all did; there were only three prices, unless there was more than one girl. But she knew they often argued over the tips. 'We could always hang out in the food hall at Harrods. At least they give you free tastings' continued Anna.

'Huh?' Dianne was miles away.

'Just kidding. To find a sheik – maybe Harrods! Forget it. Okay, what's up?'

'Mark's coming over.'

'That's good isn't it?'

'I guess, except...'

‘He doesn’t know you work at Kent’s?’

‘Nope! Could you make sure you don’t let anything slip...’

‘If I even meet him! Anyway I thought you both thought it was a bit of a joke.’

‘At home it was – we figured if I got a job at ‘Touch of Class’ and he got one at ‘Brett’s Boy’s in a month or so we could be set up.’

‘Well, if he doesn’t actually ask you’ll only be lying by omission.’

‘Exactly, and as he’s prone to jealousy...’

‘It’d be kinder!’ Anna said smiling, thinking how unusually earnest Dianne suddenly seemed. Someone cranked up the jukebox and selected, ‘Do you Really Want to Hurt Me’ at which they both dissolved into laughter.

Resuming her serious demeanour as the song ended, Dianne said, ‘I said I work with you at that vego place, do you think I *could* get a job there?’

‘I can ask, I’m calling Matt tomorrow.’

They finished their drinks, and after deciding to call it a night, hailed a mini-cab. As they climbed into the back seat of the orange Datsun, the young Indian driver grinned and said, ‘Good night ladies?’

‘Yeah. Not bad, thanks. And yours?’ replied Anna.

‘Just starting, you are my first passengers this evening and I am feeling quite lucky!’

As Dianne had grown pensive again Anna engaged with the princely looking driver, who smiled beatifically, was about their age, and seemed rather pleased with his life so far.

‘We’ve been working too, we just had a quick drink afterwards.’

‘Ah, ladies of the night!’

Dianne shot Anna a droll glance, which Anna discounted, doubting he was being facetious, and continued, ‘Actually that was my last shift.’ The driver shrugged, and slightly puzzled, gripped the steering wheel a little tighter, as if to deflect the consternation of his

passengers. After a short silence he asked, 'And which work employs you?'

'I'm on reception!' said Anna. 'Bette Davis Eyes' came on the crackly radio, and the driver began to sing in a high-pitched voice that rivalled Kim Cairns. Then, just as they turned into Castlehaven Road, they noticed the flicker of the Hawley Arms' disco ball. The late drag show must have been revived!

'What do you think?' asked Anna. Dianne smiled, asked the driver to pull over, and looking happier than she had all night, handed him a ten-pound tip. The driver, who had said he was feeling lucky, looked ecstatic. As they approached the bar Dianna said, 'Well I won't be able to tip like that if I'm working at the Wholly Grain!'

## Madam Madam

Therese stretched out on the narrow bed of the 'Tourist Park, New Delhi'. Thin beams of golden light fell across the floor in the dusk light, but the room, furnished spartanly, and with just a torn 'Doors' poster for decoration was depressing. Trying to convince herself the place had a certain rustic charm she half-closed her eyes, watching as teeming dust motes circled around the single light globe. Going solo in Japan, courtesy of a friend's parents' glamorous Shibuya apartment had been a breeze, but things would be different here.

She woke just as the sun was rising, and still a little drowsy, stepped onto her small verandah. The letters that remained of the hotel's neon sign read, '*Tou t Pa k, N hi*'. *Asia on a Shoestring* had given it a three and a half star rating, and described it as 'a series of brightly painted pavilions set amidst lush tropical gardens'. Her room, more akin to an army bunkhouse looked across a stretch of gravel, and a few spindly plants to another bunkhouse. Therese watched as an old woman in a dusty, grey sari swept rubbish into small neat piles. Thinking she'd been discreet Therese was a little taken aback when she turned and bowed, her hands pressed into a perfect *namaste*. And when Therese replied with a smile and a jerky nod, the woman's lined face lit up, her long neck unfurling to reveal perfect posture.

After dragging a small wooden stool, onto the verandah, she read on, 'close to Old Delhi, yet secluded and beautiful in our garden!' Bought for a dollar at Glebe markets, her edition was issued in 1970. She tossed it aside, threw on her Datchet jeans and alpaca jumper and hailed a rickshaw driver to take her to Connaught Circus, the business centre of New Delhi; where the exchange rate for traveller's cheques was supposedly much better.

Though it was only nine o'clock, on this busy Sunday morning the beggars were very much 'on the job', Therese sensing immediately that they knew she had just arrived. After giving a hasty twenty rupees to an eyeless woman, she was besieged by at least



eight others, all equally insistent. With impressive gusto they managed to dodge all manner of vehicles as they careered towards her, their startled prey. Although Therese found the beggars' plight most confronting she was still amused by their appropriation of the façade of the American Express office as their headquarters. 'Madam, madam, this way please!' an emaciated albino cried, ushering her inside as if he were a footman.

Waiting patiently till she'd come out again, he and his cohort had claimed her as their own, barking at any others who dared to approach. An elderly legless man, who Therese guessed was in cahoots with the eyeless woman, did however manage to slip through. Having set his sights on her from across the street (and then negotiating six lanes of breakneck traffic to reach her) he'd grabbed Therese's ankle from behind, and although she was alarmed she was also slightly enthralled. As the beggar's torso convulsed, his head bobbed like a lizard's, while his eyes, though beseeching, revealed a steely pride. It was windy, and as Therese unzipped her cumbersome money belt, fumbling for coins, a couple of loose traveller's cheques escaped. She panicked, thinking it was a ruse, but was soon chagrined when, grunting from the strain of stretching, the beggar passed her the fluttering cheques, before dodging the wrath of the approaching albino. Yet it took Therese, able-bodied and upright at least another three minutes to feel confident that the break in the traffic was sufficient for her to cross, and even then, made it to just halfway, her heart pounding, as she jumped into a vacant taxi. She had planned to spend most of the day sightseeing but had come back to the hotel around two, exhausted, deciding to shake off India by escaping to the lakes of Geneva – courtesy of her new copy of *Hotel Du Lac*.

When she awoke she felt disoriented; the traffic noise and oily whiff of diesel had abated, and the crisp evening air was redolent with the smell of roasting chestnuts. And just as she was flicking through her guidebook, contemplating changing hotels, and realising that she must have had more than a brief siesta, an eerie

mist descended – now even the ramshackle garden, with its scant and wispy foliage, exuded a certain charm. After changing into velvet jeans, (the Datchet's really were too tight) she strolled towards Mahatma Ghandi Lane where the night vendors were busy setting up food stalls.

Lured by the smell of *roti* and guided by lantern light she negotiated the pot-holed road, ignoring what she considered to be trite advice not to eat off the street. She was aware of a woman staring at her, but continued to walk. The earthy odour of dung that permeated the air was not unpleasant and she soon became adept (her flimsy sandals demanded it) at sidestepping the frequent piles. There really were so many cows! She was struck by their languor and casual confidence and having sated her hunger, stashed the remaining food, to the dismay of one of the sacred creatures, whose large brown eyes appeared to be winking at her. 'Madam, madam!' called the woman, catching up to her.

At first Therese mistook her for another beggar. Slight and grinning toothlessly, she bowed and grew even slighter, as she unravelled reams of colourful shawls from inside her sari, before spreading them on a piece of blue plastic, which she must also have had stashed. India was chillier than Therese had anticipated and she was happy to buy a cheap shawl from the woman who'd waited so patiently to conduct her business. After a minor negotiation, and now draped in crimson wool, she continued to stroll.

Even with the help of the hotel map she took a most circuitous route back, surprised when she arrived that the place was in full swing. In stark comparison with the *Paharganj* slum that she had just passed, her hotel, now softly lit by paper lanterns, could almost be construed as homely. Passing a spindly frangipani, she plucked a flower, but it was the pungent smell of hashish that filled the night air.

Back in her room, after fiddling with an adaptor for the light switch and getting a small shock in the process, she changed into a loose T-shirt and boiled water for tea, keen to return to her novel.

Perhaps Carlos really would join her here? Would Paula report back to Tim in Australia? She *had* behaved badly. But what was travel for if not to clock up a bit of well, experience! She'd never been with a Mexican, let alone a Marxist. She would write to Paula, explain that though she'd said that she fancied him, Therese hadn't understood to what degree. Perhaps she should even point out that he was fat and prone to pontificate. The draughty room's walls were so thin though, it was impossible to ignore the conversation that wafted, but more often, boomed in from next door. A girl, who sounded German and very young was comparing notes with a boy, unmistakably an Aussie, on how little money they'd been living on. By the time the boy began instructing the girl in the art of chillum packing Therese decided to give the worn out battery in her Walkman another try. Alas, it petered out halfway through her New Order tape, which though irritating was somehow apt, its English urbanity being so at odds here. She'd almost fallen asleep when Greg yelled, 'Boom Shankar!' Then there was a great crash as presumably he fell onto the bed. The girl (he didn't call her by her name) tittered for a moment then sounded like she was choking. Greg was still talking as she continued to splutter. She must have actually choked because Therese then heard thumping, and then, relief – more laughter. Therese wasn't sure if it was the language barrier or the hashish that made Greg so amusing.

Chillums were being fired up all over the hotel and muffled conversations and laughter, punctuated by bellowing 'Boom Shankars' blended with the temple crier and the night traders from the nearby streets. Therese was at a loss to understand the blasé attitude to drugs here, the security guards that paced the hotel day and night were formidable. After polishing off the last of her samosas she tried to read for a while, but felt restless. Having caught up with her jet lag, she was in the mood to do something, but what and with whom? Apart from ducking out to the street stalls for snacks and cigarettes the other tourists appeared to spend most of their time within the confines of the hotel, which by now felt more

like a compound. She pulled out her diary but had barely begun her lacklustre description of the place when the power was cut.

The next morning, she woke to the sound of *Some Girls*, blaring from a tinny cassette player. Wrapped in the hotel's signature, cotton blanket, she leant outside her door and was assailed by a scrawny, sallow Frenchman.

'Bonjour! Did I wake you?'

'Sort of, I'm Therese...' she said, shading her eyes from the mid-morning glare. He proffered his bony hand and a rat peeked out of his shirtsleeve, 'I'm Didier, and this is Bernard.' Recoiling, she stepped back, distracted by a more handsome man wearing a loose woollen ensemble, reminded her of the Jon English version of Judas in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Didier, irritated by her lack of attention, persisted, 'So you don't like Bernard?' She couldn't place this elegant man. He was certainly not typical of the guests she'd seen so far.

Didier muttered in French, then turned up the volume on the cassette player, inadvertently drowning out the two young German men on the opposite verandah who were strumming 'Heart of Gold'. Although it was the eighties (1984, to be precise) at 'The Tourist Park,' it could easily have been ten years earlier. Even the 'orange people' that had all but disappeared from the streets of Sydney, were still quite strongly represented here.

Therese grabbed a change of clothes and as she headed towards the communal bathrooms bumped into the Italians, her neighbours on the other side – two surly, thin boys donning cheesecloth vests and 'tree of life' T-shirts. They gave her a fleeting sneer when she nodded hello, too intent on their morning chillums to bother with pleasantries. It was a little harder to gauge the age of these smooth Europeans; tanned from their time in Asia, but she doubted that these two were more than twenty.

And were there no cigarette papers to be had here? They continued to scrape and mull, concentrating on the clay bowls clenched between their dirty feet. For no particular reason, perhaps

simply because they hadn't, she wanted them to acknowledge her. When she smiled they appeared to stare right through her, then, registering their sunken eyes and the fact that the taller of them had begun to scratch, she returned to her room to retrieve her camera. When she passed them a second time, they were yelling '*acha*' at an Indian boy as if he were deaf. Didier watched amused. After visiting the dingy shower block, now, exasperated and cold (she didn't have the correct coins for the hot water) she resolved to move hotels. On her way back she ran into Greg. Though he wasn't wearing a Bintang T-shirt, he did have had the golden locks she'd predicted, and a shark's tooth that bobbed on his Adam's apple.

'You Aussie?' he said, cocking his head.

'Yep!'

'Thought so! Sydney?'

'Rozelle and you?' asked Therese.

'The Shire! How long you been here?'

'A few days.'

'Staying long?'

'Not sure yet!'

'Can't you handle it?'

'I didn't say that.'

'Didn't have to – chicks usually get culture shock 'ere.'

'Really?'

'Yeah... goes away but.'

'How long does it take?'

'Huh?'

'To go away...'

'Couple of weeks! I'll see you round, eh?' Greg had spotted the German girl on her way back from the shower block.

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Walking wasn't easy here; apart from keeping a constant eye on the traffic, she had to dodge open sewers and gouges in the pitted roads, and the footpath, (where it existed) was often little more than

a few slabs of broken concrete. After an hour of refusing all manner of transport she took refuge in a teashop, where she bought dog-eared postcards from a skinny, grinning boy who was a timely distraction from a group of men who were blatantly ogling her. Avoiding eye contact with them she fixated on the postcards, thinking the one of Ganeesh had a kitsch quality she'd like to replicate. As quickly as one child hawker was shooed away, another would appear. From the second boy she bought a pencil. When she paid him and the men began to laugh, though she still felt self-conscious, she began to realise that really they were more curious than rude, *and* there was no getting around the fact that in India she, and as it turned out, her Artline pen, were a novelty. By the time the tea came she'd written a postcard to Vincent, her old friend and sometimes travel companion, who was presently somewhere in Turkey. She asked him if he'd ever met Paula through Tim, if he'd fallen in love, and if he was likely to still be in Europe when she got there.

As she looked up from writing, a sinewy, stooped man, who must have been at least eighty, tried to entice her into his rickshaw. She nodded no, glancing away, and feigning vagueness, began to contemplate...except for the strewn plastic and the Ambassadors (the saloon cars, left over from the days of the Raj) she could have slipped into an earlier century. When he became more insistent, leaning a bony elbow on the corner of her table, she raised her cup to her lips, indicating, she hoped, that she was staying put. Electing to act as her spokesmen, the man beside her yelled, '*Challo!*' at the old man. Cringing, as she watched him slink away, she had at least committed another handy word to memory. She felt listless and out of place, and perhaps, yes homesick. But for what! Her friends were scattered across the globe, her career opportunities were well, the same as they ever were, and as for her family – frankly it was a relief to not have to bother.

As he moved on passenger-less, she thought of the rickshaw pullers at the airport, some carting up to four fleshy westerners at a

time. She'd vowed never to ride in one – their plight disturbing her almost as much as those blind and limbless beggars in Connaught Circus. After leaving the teashop she was determined to walk, imagining that if she avoided the main roads, she might be left alone. After refusing three taxis and two man-powered rickshaws she gave in to an elaborately decorated, auto rickshaw driver. Honking his high-pitched horn, he grinned showing large white teeth, the rest of his face obscured by garlands of pink and orange pom-poms. He suggested he take her to 'Chandni Chowk', the Old Delhi market, and since she was more-or-less headed there, she agreed, resigning herself to the fact that here, walking just didn't seem to be an option. As he manoeuvred his gaudy vehicle, yelling and waving all the while, Therese again understood that what seemed like aggression was merely interaction. There was an order, slowest to the left and each time you passed something, it seemed a small victory had occurred, one that required auditory acknowledgement.

Sitting in this multi-coloured vehicle with its baubles, grinning plastic gods and the squeaking radio was quite uplifting. She forgot about her dingy hotel, and let herself be swept away by this, the oldest part of the city. Then, as she listened to the driver's high-pitched rendition of what must have been a Hindi standard, she noticed something incongruous. A tall blonde man, Nordic looking and swathed in a grey dhoti was slumped against a wall, a clay bowl at his dirty bare feet. Therese was wondering how he dared compete with all the poor in India as she glanced, first at his translucent face and then at the reactions he elicited from the locals.

As she did, his lost eyes fixed on hers, and his slender fingers pushed his bowl inside the cab. She looked away, willing the traffic to move, but it didn't. 'Welcome to India, can you spare me some change?' He was droll. Her embarrassment shifted to irritation, as she wondered why he didn't just go home to whichever rich country he'd come from. As he turned his attention to a well-dressed Indian woman, Therese noticed that through his thin-lipped sneer, his bared teeth were surprisingly white, and so straight he must have been

treated to some orthodontics. Watching the Indian woman recoil, even though she did drop a few coins in his bowl, Therese began to wonder if some misfortune had befallen, this obviously, 'once strapping' lad, but when he smirked as they moved on, her momentary sympathy dissipated. The beggars here were not theatrical like the ones in Connaught Circus, she thought, as she watched a line of twenty or so, waiting for what must have been their daily meal. Perhaps she had judged the Nordic beggar too harshly; the idea of competing for survival in this city of thirteen million really was quite daunting. She checked her money belt. Aside from its ugly design and inaccessibility, it was conspicuous and she vowed to buy of those 'scapula-like' thin-strapped bags, she'd seen adorning the necks of the European hippies.

Now that they were in the thick of Old Delhi, with the rickshaw moving so slowly it was virtually redundant, she realised, that except for the beggar she'd seen no other tourists. A well-to-do family of seven, all with the same portly proportions trotted into a glamorous Mogul restaurant, ignoring the pair of insistent beggars, hovering out the front. The driver registering her interest enthused, 'Karim's! Very good, number one!' Fat was obviously beautiful here she mused, as she grappled with an internal contradiction – her desire for ambiguity and to indulge in leisurely, uninterrupted voyeurism had, at its heart, a kind of avoidance – what India demanded was participation!

The driver had stopped singing and for a moment Therese wondered if his pensive mood had fallen in with her own. That was until she realised he'd been gawping at the half an inch of cleavage she'd been unwittingly exposing. She pulled her shawl across her breasts and mustered a proprietary look. He quickly got the message, wagging his head; intimating unmistakably, apology. Had he guessed that she found the gesture endearing? He must have had a sudden flash of his wife's or perhaps his mother's disapproving visage, because he raised his eyes heavenward, his eyelids closed and slightly fluttering, no doubt beseeching one of his more



sympathetic Gods. The power of prayer however was not strong enough, and though Therese tried to tear him from his contemplation, tapping him urgently on the shoulder, it was alas, not in time to avoid hitting the rickshaw in front. Although Therese saw this as her opportunity to vacate, both drivers demanded she stay put. The police were mentioned, but after much hubbub and a serious exchange of business cards it seemed that the matter had been resolved.

When they reached the spice market, where the streets were so narrow it was strictly single file, the driver began enthusing about a temple she *must* see. It was unremarkable, akin to a small suburban church, and when he insisted she take a photograph, she did, not bothering to explain that there was no film in her camera. He grew excited insisting she take one of him for his brother or was it his mother, in Calcutta? She felt bad about the ongoing deception but snapped away. His enthusiasm was such that it would have been a beautiful photograph. When she saw a huge Kodak sign, she asked him to pull over. Inside the shop, people were chatting as if at a cocktail party, and though she waited in line to be served, two men pushed her to the front.

With film in her camera now, Therese took a few more quick shots, promising she'd bring the photographs to the taxi stand once she'd had them developed. Surely now they could part company! When she opened her money belt to pay and he began to protest, she noticed that his teeth were stained red. Ignoring her question he began to shout maniacally, 'Jami Masjid is number one!' She was fairly sure that was the temple they'd passed before. Growing irritated she said, 'I'm not going there. Please! How much do I owe you?'

'Madam you can't leave me! I am charging you twenty rupees for the coming and for the going you are my guest!'

'But I have arrived! I want to walk!'

'Okay! Okay! Then I am waiting.'

Therese looked back. How far had they come? Perhaps, ridiculous as it was, it would be easier to just let him drive her back to the hotel. Had he misunderstood her? He seemed most adamant he was her driver for the day. But surely not for twenty rupees!

‘Okay so I’ll do some shopping and then we’ll go back!’

‘Yes madam! Very good! Sari? Gold?’

Thinking more along the lines of lentils and spices she recalled reading about the jewellers of Old Delhi and said, ‘Do you know the *Jauhari* shops?’

‘*Acha acha!*’ he said, seizing on her suggestion, beeping and forcing a break in the traffic and almost taking out a street stall in his wake. Therese was staring at a Colgate advertisement of a wide-mouthed blonde woman, when the driver screeched to a halt before pointing towards a steep staircase, above which was a gaudy yellow sign.

‘*Vaham Upara!*’ he insisted. Again she hesitated, why had she mentioned the jewellers? She was neither in the market for trinkets nor in the mood for shopping. Feeling quite ill at ease, she managed to be philosophical; it was the tourist dilemma – even when you’d just arrived somewhere, you were expected to have a sense of purpose – well, at least some idea of where you wanted to go.

The driver turned off the spluttering motor, wiped a smear of grease from his face, and after pointing again at the sign said, ‘Don’t worry madam! I am sleeping now till you are finishing!’ Judging by his eyes, she doubted it! As soon as Therese vacated the cab he got in the back and stretched out on the thin metal bench that was the passenger seat. Realising that after buying the film, and paying the taxi fare (she was still unsure if it was only twenty rupees, it’d been fifty from the airport to her hotel) she would only have a hundred rupees remaining. Reluctantly she climbed the rickety stairs.

As she neared the top she noticed a hand slide a curtain across the inside of the barred window, just as a small boy appeared to show her in. Inside the narrow stairwell two older boys wearing white lungis greeted her with *namastes*, so full of flourish their heads

almost scraped the floor. She smiled at them, still not quite up to returning the greeting. Steaming chai was brought out and she was ushered to sit on a small prayer mat. Adjusting to the lamplight she could see three more men; two in stained brown lungis, tinkering with pieces of metal, and a third; younger and more flashily dressed, who introduced himself as Shanti.

Wearing several jewel encrusted rings, gold bangles, and with a very long fingernail on the little finger of his left hand, he insisted that she have more chai, his intense black eyes honing in on her only piece of jewellery: a chipped enamel ring, bought for two dollar at an “Indian shop” in Town Hall station. He effused about it so much that Therese decided to let him keep it, then, after half heartedly protesting, got down to business – producing his ‘premier’ pieces, elaborating on which jeweller had made which, before furtively pulling two tightly bound cotton bags from under the small table. Uncurling his long fingers he let the stones tumble onto a swatch of red velvet. She had little experience of gemstones, and lit by the flames of the soldering irons they really were dazzling; but not nearly as dazzling as the smiles of the jewellers, who sat cross-legged; with their obedient expressions turned to Shanti, as they listened to his spiel, as if for the first time.

He then measured Therese’s ring finger, before presenting her with the soiled, ‘design books’. A sitar could be heard from a nearby room. Shanti had performed well and Therese knew she must buy something, but was quite surprised when they managed to come to an agreement so easily. She hoped she’d calculated correctly – for about eighteen dollars, she would be picking up one of the *antique* styles in a week. Since he seemed more than happy with her fifty-rupee deposit, she doubted it was much more, and pocketing the ancient looking business card, made a decent job of her first *namaste* as she left. Her driver, looking bored as he spat betel juice and chatted with another taxi driver, stopped mid-sentence, to greet Shanti. Shanti though, having completed his business and overtaken Therese on the stairs, seemed keen to be elsewhere.

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It was a cloudy Thursday morning and Therese woke with a headache. Courtesy of the local buses, she had spent the last two days visiting Humayun's tomb; a sort of mini Taj Mahal, the Red Fort and the Lodi Gardens. Since her trip to Old Delhi, the rickshaw driver had become particularly hard to shake and to avoid him she had taken to entering and exiting the hotel via a narrow laneway that ran behind the hotel laundry. She didn't feel like being a tourist today, and began to fantasise about a lazy day in a comfortable hotel. After dragging a brush through her hair, she proceeded to reception.

The 'Tourist Park' receptionist, a different one, she noted with relief, wasn't pleased but promised if he could re-book her room she would be able to leave 'at the earliest possibility!' She was trying to explain that she was only paid up until Saturday and as she'd be leaving sometime between now and then, she'd like to pick up her passport, when she noticed the exotic young man she'd locked eyes with on Monday hovering in the doorway.

'Need some help?'

'Any laundry to complete madam?' The receptionist cut in, seemingly annoyed.

'No, no laundry, just my passport please.'

'Very well! Then I see you are completely paid in full and are free to leave us madam.'

Therese thanked him, put her passport away and fell in step with the young man, who asked if she was going to Diwali.

'Where?'

'It's a festival! Should be good for photographs – I couldn't help noticing you have a nice camera.'

Therese hesitated.

'I'd be happy to take you!' His English was deliberate but fluent, and though she couldn't place his accent, she was fairly sure that he wasn't Indian. She also noticed that he'd trimmed his beard.

‘Okay, I’ll change some money and shall I meet you at the rickshaw stand?’ Therese was rather surprised she’d so easily disregarded the most rudimentary of travel advice for solo female travellers.

‘No we can go by bus. I’ll come in half an hour if that’s okay. Room 144?’

‘Yes!’ So he knew her room number. She supposed it was because of her acquaintance with Didier. ‘I’m Therese!’

‘Kossim! Pleased to meet you!’ he offered his long slim hand.

Stuffed into the crowded bus, an enthusiastic Indian gentleman who’d moved along so Therese could sit next to him, listened eagerly as Kossim leant in to Therese and said, ‘I’m glad you came!’

After a short silence, Therese asked Kossim how well he knew Didier. When he laughed disdainfully, the Indian gentleman, whose knees were pressing into Therese’s, interrupted, and addressing Kossim probed, ‘In Delhi, you learn speaking?’

Kossim responded curtly in Hindi, before turning back to Therese, ‘He’s been at The Tourist Park as long as I’ve been in Delhi, which is more than two years. He speaks Hindi better than most, and Urdu but we’re not really friends.’ As they neared the entrance to the parade, the noise level crescendoed to the point that they could no longer hear each other speak. Meanwhile a cage full of chickens had been shoved along the aisle and was jammed against Therese’s ankles. There was no floor space and when she felt a talon, or perhaps it was a beak, digging into her foot, she grimaced. Kossim looked down, and freeing the bird’s leg joked,

‘So you don’t like chicken?’

She smiled gratefully, ‘Thanks – I don’t like them touching me!’

‘Ah, and what about the eating?’ She didn’t know if this was a quasi-religious question, most of the northerners didn’t seem to be vegetarian but perhaps he was from the south, if he was even Indian.

Everyone got off the bus at the entrance to Mathura Road; the gateway to the festival. Even busier than Chandi Chowk market, Therese thought, holding her camera close. Jostled and hot, she took a deep breath and tried to get into the spirit of the thing. They could only take small steps as the crowd pressed from all sides. Children sat on parents' shoulders, clasping streamers and strings of marigolds.

She'd almost forgotten Kossim had asked her a question. 'I'm not a vegetarian, if that's what you mean.'

He smiled. 'Then please, come to my house for dinner tomorrow night, my friends and I are getting a goat.' Therese looked bemused.

'It's going to be a small party.'

Though Therese had agreed to go, she thought the invitation a little premature. Convincing herself there was nothing predatory about him, she entertained the possibility of a frisson, but considered that as he was so very polite and formal, perhaps he just wanted to improve his English.

Meanwhile he took her in, thinking her rather contemplative.

Therese took a few photographs, finding it hard to focus with the volume of the oncoming throng. It really was quite a procession, she thought, trying to dispel the fact that her stomach was beginning to gripe ... she should have boiled the kettle for longer.... Diwali seemed quite pagan with these larger than life-size, paper-mâché monkeys, elephants and chubby Krishna babies. She'd had a touch of claustrophobia before but not like this. A child tugged at her skirt and she began to sweat even though it was November and the temperature was mild. Kossim, concerned and attentive as he was proving to be, passed her his water bottle

She hesitated, wondering how she could refuse the water without causing offence, and as a distraction, made an elaborate display of a world closing in on her; clasping her hands around her ears and pressing her eyes shut. He looked puzzled, then laughed, 'My sister has this too.' And just as she began to recover, as simultaneously it

seemed, the crowd began to disperse, he offered it again, 'It's boiled' He smiled. Therese feeling a little dramatic, sipped, 'I think I just needed some air'. Lightly clasping her elbow, Kossim guided her through the dissipating crowd.

'Where are you from?' she asked, 'I meant to ask before but we got talking about something else.'

'I'm Afghan but I'm stuck in India for now.' Unsure how to continue she waited for him to elaborate. Perhaps he was just two or three years older than she but the weariness in his eyes, despite the fact that he was trying to make light of his situation, made him seem him older. She has a sudden glimpse of how he might see her – light, carefree, a touch trivial.

'Afghanistan is not a good place for me, and even if it was I can't go back now.' His tone, though not bitter, sounded resigned.

'Because of the Russians?' asked Therese whose politics were sketchy at the best of times.

'Not just the Russians, the Mujahadeen, the tribes, everyone is fighting. It's a mess, but it is the regime that I am in trouble with.'

'I can't really pretend to understand.'

'Why should you? In Australia you have peace.'

'Yes, it's not something we've really had to think about I suppose, well not since Vietnam.' Therese felt a little false invoking Vietnam so casually into her personal experience; the closest she'd come was a friend with a much older brother who'd avoided conscription when she was in primary school. There was another lull in the conversation and she sensed there was little she could say to alleviate the anxiety of her new friend. She offered to buy lunch. He was appealing, his shyness offsetting his strong chiselled features, but already it was hard to ignore the earnest tone that tended to creep into their conversation.

Therese affected a light-hearted tourist demeanour, and feigned interest in a singlet that was hanging in the window of a small clothing bazaar. Kossim hovered a little awkwardly as she asked the salesman if he could get it down for her. 'Krishna is

number one madam!’ he enthused, passing it to Therese, who took off her T-shirt and slipped it on. Kossim averted his eyes, even though she wore a singlet underneath, perhaps more for the benefit of the shopkeeper who was openly scrutinising him, no doubt trying to ascertain his relationship with his new foreign customer. The singlet, with its slightly demonic looking, baby Krishna was the perfect souvenir.

Kossim insisted on paying, and as she hadn’t wanted to intervene in the bartering between Kossim and the salesman, she insisted she buy lunch, ‘Do you feel like a *thali*? I know a really good place.’

Kossim smiled, amused by her casual acquaintance with things Indian. The floats had dispersed and since the crowds had split off in various directions the now visible streets were awash with colour – littered with torn streamers, confetti and the flattened petals of marigolds.

‘Please, you are my guest – I know somewhere you probably haven’t tried. Let me take you.’

After walking a while, they arrived at a cluster of roadside stalls, where a boy was piercing slabs of fish doused in red sauce, and cooking them over an open fire. Kossim recommended it, but when Therese noticed that the fish shared a large metal tub with hundreds of flies she opted for a vegetable *thali*. Watching him savour the fish she couldn’t resist trying it. It was delicious and unlike anything she’d ever tasted – pungent yet sweet, and spicy yet delicate. And when the bill came she realised that the food was so cheap it didn’t matter who paid.

‘If you know anybody that needs some clothes made, or wants to buy rugs ... I’m a tailor and a sort of agent; that’s why I was at your hotel the other day measuring up those Italians.’ He seemed sad, almost ashamed and she wasn’t sure if it was because of his lack of funds or the nature of the work he’d been forced into. Already she was considering his position, forming mental sentences before speaking them, making sure she didn’t patronise or offend.



She wondered if he was doing the same? Was it even friendship he wanted? Perhaps she was being naïve, assuming he was more serious than she. His penetrating eyes were taking her in, till his steady sincerity unnerved her and she looked away.

She'd asked about his family, and as he was telling her that he was worried about his mother, she realised when she felt him flinch that her smile must have bore too much sympathy. As if to change the subject he pointed to a man, who'd been part of the parade? Wearing a huge elephant mask, and carrying a live monkey, he walked towards them.

When Therese said, 'Here comes *Ganeesh!*' Kossim smiled and she took what she thought might be her first decent photograph; the golden trunk of the man's mask appeared to be lavishly draped around Kossim's shoulders as she angled her camera from below. Watching Therese adjust the light metre, before shifting her focus to the man and his monkey, Kossim asked, 'So have you been to India before?'

'No, but I do remember the Indian Gods from art history.' She didn't bother mentioning those torn Indian posters that hung from her bedroom walls back in Surry Hills.

The Hindu festival got them talking about religion and when she described herself as a lapsed Catholic he nodded seriously. Though at first she wasn't sure if he'd understood when he went on to express his disillusionment with Hindu and Islamic hypocrisy, elaborating with a brief account of his not so strict, by Afghan standards, Moslem upbringing, she realised he must have.

'So you see I am *lapsed* also!'

'Yes, sounds like it.' Therese laughed, encouraging him to go into more detail about his life in Afghanistan. He'd studied science and history at university in Kabul, but had been distracted by politics, or more specifically the involvement of his brothers with the rebels, and had completed neither.

'On my twenty-third birthday my older brother was killed in crossfire between the rebels and the Afghan army and my youngest

brother was intent on revenge. My mother was terrified he'd be killed too, and insisted I infiltrate their group. He tried to convince our mother that what they were doing was within the law, but she remained sceptical. Soon after we were accused of killing an Afghan officer. That was when I fled across the border.'

'And your brother?'

Kossim winced. 'I think he's still hiding in the mountains. At least that's what I've told my mother.'

'So you can't go back till the war's over?'

'Not unless I want to spend my life in an Afghan prison.'

Therese looked slightly shocked, and registering the import of what he'd just said, also realised he seemed relieved to have had explained his situation. 'You remind me of my sister, Fila; your eyes especially.' Changing the subject he produced a black and white photograph of a beautiful young woman with a perfect oval face, and a solemn, though gentle expression.

'But she looks so much like *you*!' Therese was flattered by the comparison.

'Yes, we're quite similar,' He smiled into the camera as Therese took another photograph. They sat pensive for a while, and as each thought about the other, their initial awkwardness seemed to wane. The waiter said something that amused Kossim as he cleared their plates and when Therese asked to be let in on the joke he shrugged her off. She was pleased to see this more playful side of him. Walking back to her hotel accompanied, afforded a pleasant respite from taxi drivers, hawkers and gawkers, as she listened happily to his account of growing up in a small village outside Kandahar.

When they entered the 'Tourist Park' she noticed him stiffen; averting his eyes as they passed two of the security guards, then as Therese fumbled with her key she heard Didier's already familiar snicker from his prone position on the verandah. Kossim returned his cryptic smile.

Didier whined ‘So! You are not going to invite me for coffee?’ Kossim shut the door on him hoping Therese wasn’t going to succumb, which, judging from their previous conversation he doubted. ‘He’s such a bore!’ she said boiling water for tea. Kossim sat on one of the plastic stools watching her unwrap the enamel cups they’d bought on the way home. She gave him an abridged version of her life in Sydney: art school, a younger brother, how her parents had recently divorced.

‘I’m sorry!’

‘Oh don’t be. It’s been coming for ages!’

‘And your mother, how will she...’

‘She has her own money, in fact she’s probably better off than my father.’

‘So you’re not divorced?’ Kossim asked.

Therese laughed. ‘No! I’m only twenty-four! I *was* living with my boyfriend but we broke up.’

‘So he is finished?’ He visibly brightened.

Therese laughed, realising he had at least one thing in common with most of the men she’d known: that familiar look of approval at the mention of a recent suitor being delegated to the past. Not that he’d stated any intention, but the chemistry, she was fairly sure, wasn’t completely one-sided.

‘And you? Do you have a girlfriend?’

‘No! I am twenty seven, the girls I used to know would all be married with children by now.’

‘Oh yes.’ Therese’s voice trailed off, then she continued, half to herself. ‘In Australia we are still wondering what to do with ourselves at twenty seven.’

Then Kossim, either because he had nothing more to add or because he realised he needed to be elsewhere said, ‘I should go now. So will you come to dinner tomorrow night?’

‘Yes, I’d like to.’

On Friday morning Kossim was trying to fix the treadle on the sewing machine again, recalling his father's kind but serious face. From a long line of tailors he'd loathed sewing and had worked long hours to establish his small machinery factory, one that had eventually been successful enough to afford all four of his children a decent education. Sadly though, just before his sister had finished university he'd died of an aneurism, and now his mother, who was still reeling from his premature death, followed shortly by the death of her eldest son, also had to endure the estrangement of Kossim and his younger brother. He needed to send money home; he knew that Fila, even though she'd graduated from Medicine would probably still be working as a nurse where the remuneration would be paltry.

Therese was less patronising than most tourist women – his only reservation was that something about her reminded him of Marianne, the Frenchwoman he'd fallen in with not long after arriving in Delhi. Still recoiling from that humiliation he would, of course, be more cautious with Therese. His best friend, Aziz, was determined he was going home to marry (once the war was over) and probably the others would too, but Kossim saw no future in Afghanistan, and though he missed his mother and sister he wanted a different life, one that required a passport. He liked Therese, who really did remind him of Fila, and of course the opportunity she presented. She was younger and more voluptuous than the delicate Marianne, whose sophisticated Parisian ways had tended towards finicky. He still felt reviled by how desperate he'd been to keep her, how he'd borne her every whim, until in the end she'd despised him. Perhaps what Therese and Marianne shared was an aptitude for boredom, but as Aziz maintained, most Western women did. Apart from this, and her tendency to flippancy, Therese really reminded him more of his sister, especially with her determined independence; and that steady, knowing expression that made him feel uncomfortably transparent.

When he picked Therese up later on that evening, after three changes of outfit, Kossim had settled on another of his elegant wool ensembles. Looking casually sophisticated, he made Therese feel underdressed in her stonewashed jeans and mohair jumper. Before Kossim had arrived she was wearing a midnight blue, sheath dress, had teased her hair at the front, and applied bright pink lipstick. But then, when she'd looked in the mirror, had quickly changed, scraping off the lipstick and flattening her hair. What was perfect for a night at Stranded, or even a Roppongi club felt wrong here. The rickshaw wound through a tangle of tiny lanes before delivering them to his flat, where seven young men were seated on piles of cushions around a long, low table. When Kossim introduced Therese they took turns greeting her, each murmuring, '*Salam alaikum*' before bowing and resuming their cross legged positions on the floor. Except for Aziz, who had similarly striking features and the same jet black eyes as Kossim, no one spoke any English, but as they were all so naturally hospitable she found it easy to relax, unlike Kossim, who was fussing, offering water, re-arranging the cushions and fiddling with the volume of the cassette player. Aziz was so amused she refrained from catching his eye, and though mindful of being a foreigner and the only woman, Therese found the doleful, Arabic sounding music transporting, and was not at all uncomfortable chatting, with the help of some translation from Aziz, despite the fact that she knew he was appraising her on behalf of his friend. Sipping water that she wished was wine, she realised that, unlike Kossim; his friends were seemingly teetotal. Swathes of fabric draped from the ceiling, ornate kilms hung on the walls, and ceramic bowls overflowed with nuts and fruit, and, even though the flat was poky with just two small high windows it hinted at a much cosier largesse. This kind of exile didn't seem half bad.

There was an air of expectancy when Kossim and Faheem, the youngest of them, retreated to the outdoor annex that served as the kitchen. After much clatter and banging they returned with huge

platters of various vegetable dishes as well as the sizzling, centrepiece: the goat. Drizzled with a green glistening sauce it was met with a chorus of appreciative sighs. Kossim sat then got up again to get glasses for Therese's bottles of Kingfisher. Meanwhile no one had touched a morsel of the now, not so sizzling food. The conversation lulled, Aziz and Kossim exchanged expectant glances, and then Aziz passed the platter of goat to Therese. But – how to eat it? There were no plates or cutlery. Aziz smiled and glanced at the bread. She hesitated.

‘You are our guest, please, you must begin!’ Kossim broke in. She tore a strip, and copied Aziz, who was deftly scooping up the meat and sauce. Relieved, the others began to eat with the fervour that such a spread demanded. And once their appetites were sated, the conversation began – a few subdued murmurs at first, which then gave way to a conducive, party-like atmosphere.

Therese was unaware she'd spilt some sauce on her jumper and Kossim passed her a damp cloth as she watched Aziz whisper something to Faheem. After bursting into laughter, before realising they'd embarrassed her, Aziz implored Kossim, who was standing behind him, to explain how her mohair jumper had simply reminded them of Aziz's pompous uncle, well known in their village for boasting about the superior fleece of his goatherd. Kossim squeezed in next to Therese again, his hand resting lightly on the small of her back. She sensed a shift in him, he was less timid and his eyes were a little shiny, though – from just two small glasses of beer?

Faheem, the only one dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, put on a Cat Stevens cassette and proceeded to pack the hookah, and though he spoke very little English, managed to explain to Therese how he'd left Afghanistan around the same time as Kossim. He smiled and when he offered her the contraption, the thing was so convoluted, with all its tubes and pipes – she wasn't sure which was the mouthpiece. She'd always wanted to try one, ever since frequenting ‘Fatima's’ Lebanese restaurant in Redfern, the well known, Sydney establishment where the owners would ‘turn a blind eye’ to

customers smoking joints or pipes in the upstairs rooms, but where the hookahs had remained strictly the domain of the Lebanese gentlemen.

She found the long tube surprisingly hard to suck on, but Faheem demonstrated patiently, exaggerating the long in-breath. This got the others onto a discussion, that seemed to be about technique or etiquette, and Kossim rolled his eyes, for as he'd explained to Therese previously, he'd heard it all before. She smiled.

With Faheem's patient instruction and a little less concentration she got the thing working beautifully. As she exhaled her thoughts began racing, and before long she couldn't stop talking, or more precisely, asking questions. She started on Afghan women: did they smoke? How long did they attend school? She even asked if they were really expected to be virgins when they married. Then realising she'd brought up sex in front of a roomful of men; one that might already consider her a 'loose' woman, simply by virtue of the fact that she was travelling unaccompanied, she grew circumspect.

Kossim who had been madly translating refrained on her last question, but judging by his pleased expression was enjoying her more forthright manner, even though he must have known it was largely due to Faheem's recently arrived, premium grade, hashish. The others, except Aziz, were at a loss to understand her, but were amused as once again they watched Kossim revelling in the intimacy that his knowledge of English afforded him. He was the most educated of them all, and after Aziz the one they turned to for advice.

Therese's interest in sexual politics was something Kossim would try to address later, hopefully when they were alone. It was her turn to smoke again. She inhaled slowly without coughing this time, and when Faheem encouraged her to have more she did, not noticing that Faheem was smirking at Kossim, on his way out to the bathroom. Therese was no stranger to the odd joint, but they'd never affected her like this.

Aziz, hearing her asking Kossim if it were hashish, insisted it was a type of 'Afghan tobacco'. She slouched back on the cushions, so disinhibited she felt herself to be almost a casual observer. These men had been forced to grow up fast, they'd already participated in a war and now had to endure living in exile, yet they still seemed naïve, she was at a loss to think what they made of her. Kossim and probably Aziz seemed to have a handle on 'the west', even though India was presumably as far as they had travelled, but she couldn't fathom the others.

Another puff of the hookah had her recalling a particularly hazy night at 'Fatima's' (or was that 'Abdul's'? ). The night Peter had suggested they move in together, or more specifically, that he move in with her. If they hadn't would they still have split up? Probably. She glanced about the room. Her intermittent uneasiness seemed to diminish and instead she began to feel a sort of earthy euphoria. She put it down to the atmosphere; then recalled what everyone said about Afghani hash. It had been around when she finished school but had disappeared shortly after. Afghani tobacco – of course, they were having her on.

Kossim had moved up to the other end of the table and was speaking in what she assumed was Pashtu. Concentrating on the sound of the language rather than the words she rather imagined she could understand him; then, just as she caught his eye, had the distinct sensation that the others were staring at her. Her heart began to pound, as she declined another smoke of the hookah and reached for a second beer instead. Was nobody else concerned that the volume of the music was fluctuating so erratically? As Kossim's friends skipped from one subject to another, realising she was only able to discern whether they were talking about life in Afghanistan or India, she experienced along with her paranoia, a sort of heightened intuition – the desperation beneath their mannered veneer was palpable.

She hadn't made sense of their political position yet, whether they were defectors, activists or just wanted by the regime, but she



knew that these were innocent men, or at the very least, were victims of circumstance. She also surmised that although they were extremely polite, they mightn't have been very keen on Kossim bringing her into their private world. Her clarity was elusive however; it seemed that as soon as she'd manage to thread a few thoughts together, she'd space out again; no longer even sure if the volume of the music, which at the moment sounded like Nana Mouskouri, had been fluctuating at all.

'Are you okay Therese?' Kossim appeared with coffee.

'Yeah, just a little tired.'

After the coffee, though she hardly felt like moving, she said she'd better head back. The others, obviously understanding, spoke briefly to Kossim and bid Therese farewell. Their exit was so sudden it seemed pre-orchestrated. But, she considered, if he'd conspired to be alone with her wouldn't he have simply invited her another night? On his way back in Kossim picked up the sweets he hadn't served. She'd seen the bright orange concoctions dripping in syrup in the shops but had so far refrained. The texture was rubbery in her dry mouth and when Kossim passed her the last of the beers she was so thirsty, she downed most of the bottle, before having to dash to the bathroom.

With the door ajar, she sat for a while contemplating whether or not she should stay the night. He'd as good as invited her. A lizard darted up the wall, pausing at a dislodged panel in the ceiling. Closing the door quietly, she stood on a wooden crate to investigate. Quite a stash! At a glance there were several kilos of the stuff. The tailor story suddenly made sense, as did Didier's snideness. Definitely a sign that she should go home, but when she came back inside Kossim was reclining on the cushions, looking more at ease than she'd seen him so far.

'Come sit for a while and then I'll get you a taxi. I've had a really nice evening and I'm sorry my friends, except Aziz of course, don't speak any English.' His quiet confidence, as he reclined,

statuesque in the lamplight, was a change of tack, or perhaps he was much more at home in the role of seducer than he was tourist guide.

‘Not at all, your friends are really nice. And to them I’m really just another tourist, a stranger.’

‘No! They like you! Even though, like me, they’re a little jealous. We’re strangers too; we just can’t leave! And we’re not welcome.’ Therese *had* thought the Indian shopkeeper where she’d bought the singlet, very offhand in his manner with Kossim. He paused and Therese intent on drawing him out affected one of her most empathetic expressions. ‘India has so many problems of its own. It’s hard for us to get work, housing... sorry I’m boring you.’

‘No, no you’re not. I want to know!’ On an impulse she reached across and placed his hand in hers. He seemed overly moved by the simple gesture, as if he’d only just been managing to keep his emotions in check. The music, now an Afghan equivalent of Ravi Shankar, had stopped and regaining his composure he said,

‘Shall I take you back now?’

Therese looked into his eyes, and convincing herself they held no danger, said, ‘Do you think I could have another puff?’ glancing at the hookah.

‘How about I roll you a joint instead? You’re not my first Aussie guest you know.’

Kossim looked pleased as he opened a small tin filled with smoking paraphernalia, and Therese smirked, ‘Then shouldn’t you be packing me a chillum?’

‘Boom Shanka’ he muttered, rolling his eyes.

While Therese was glad they shared a disdain for The Tourist Park and most of its residents, she wondered if she could fairly exclude herself from their milieu. He began crumbling the hash – the block was as big as her little finger but she feigned nonchalance. ‘So that *is* what was in the hookah!’

‘Well Aziz just likes to call it Afghani tobacco, the last thing we need is trouble with the police.’ She was about to offer to help clean up, but when she glanced at the table nothing of the lavish

meal remained. After a few sighs and what bordered on a theatrical yawn, Kossim asked her if she'd like to stay. Therese floated easily from the lounge to the bedroom – where a faded green sari was really all that separated the rooms. She began to wonder how many other women had lain here before her, but pushed the thought aside and let her instincts, or as it happened his, take over. *Were* they already in trouble with the Indian police? He drew back, looking at her hands as he let them slip from his.

‘They’re beautiful!’

‘I was just thinking the same about yours!’ She said, pulling him towards her. As they fell back onto the bed, she glimpsed through the gauzy sari, a silhouette of a slim girl slipping out through the kitchen.

The next morning she woke sleepily, to the sound of a rooster crowing. A shaft of yellow light fell across Kossim’s face and chest. He was pretending to be asleep, but wasn’t very convincing. Luxuriating in his newly found intimacy he turned, and with his eyes still closed, reached for her. She traced a finger along his chest, his olive skin, slightly sallow, was damp to her touch – without clothes their differences were negligible.

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She had been at the ‘Tourist Park’ a week now, and her absence last night had not gone unnoticed by Didier. When she strolled in just after eleven he smirked, registering the pinkness in her cheeks and her dishevelled hair. He was playing *Some Girls* again and singing in a most affected way. Therese stared straight back at him and said, ‘Bonjour Didier, and how is Bernard?’

‘Bernard is very well and you are too, no?’ She was about to go inside, but instead asked, ‘Oh Didier which post office has ‘Poste Restante?’

‘Oh since you are speaking such nice French, I will take you. I have to go that way anyway; but first we have coffee, no?’ Therese

knew that meant at least another hour, and decided to finish the aerogram she'd begun writing to Vincent.

Two hours later they were having coffee with his friends at Gaylords, where the patrons were mainly disciples of the guru, Sai Baba and almost exclusively European. Didier pushed aside a pile of the guru's pamphlets so he could roll a cigarette, then, in rapid French addressed his white-robed friends. Unable to understand them Therese examined one of the pamphlets – the image of a chubby, serene yet moon-faced man in flouncy white robes was hard to take seriously. A woman, thirty something, with a small pointy face and thin pale lips eyed her sternly. Had she smirked? Thinking not Therese rolled her eyes, before looking away, as Didier passed a small package to her dour looking friend under the table. Imagining them both in a compromising position with Sai Baba at some tantric workshop, Therese paid for her coffee and left.

The Post Office was frenetic and with just two of the twelve queues designated to foreigners it promised to be quite a wait. She scanned the gaunt faces in the tourist lines; a European in a dirty dhoti returned a hostile stare. Fairly sure there'd be no mail for her, she was pleasantly surprised to collect two items, an aerogram from Vincent and rather oddly, a postcard from his ex-girlfriend, Julia. Therese had only met Julia a few times, but felt she knew her, well at least Vincent's version, which ranged from, 'flirtatious and cute' to 'manipulative and narcissistic'. Still his vitriol, usually expressed in an unguarded moment after too many drinks, hinted that his relationship with Julia had been more complex than he'd let on. Curious, Therese read her card, deciding to save Vincent's letter for later.

*Dear Therese,*

*12<sup>th</sup> November, 1985*

*Not sure if you remember me, you came to a party*

*at my place in Balmain once. Vincent mentioned that you were*

*heading to India after Japan and that you*

*mightn't mind my looking you up. I'm staying at the*

*'Star Palace' on the Kailash Rd for two weeks.*

*(It's just near 'the New Delhi Train Station')*

*Perhaps lunch?*

*I'm in room 3. Phone no: 23010488.*

*Ask for Mr John. (He speaks English.)*

*Julia.*

On Sunday night Therese called the hotel and arranged to meet Julia the following day. She'd spent the last three nights with Kossim and apart from feeling like a change of scene, still needed to find another hotel. Kossim was making tea and suggesting he take her to the warehouse he'd mentioned that specialised in art supplies when she rather abruptly told him she couldn't go, not bothering to mention she was meeting someone from home. Ignoring his disappointment she kissed him offhandedly and hailed a rickshaw to the 'Star Palace'. Mr John summoned a bellboy to escort her up the carpeted staircase to Madam Julia's 'de luxe suite number three'.

Wearing cream linen trousers, a shoulder padded, brocade jacket and blue suede boots Julia was prettier and more petite than Therese had recalled. Had she dressed up specially? And although Therese wasn't quite as excited to see Julia, as Julia was she, Therese *was* enthralled with the superior hotel. As the conversation loosened over tiffins (they'd proceeded to the tearoom, courtesy of a hand delivered invitation from Mr John) Therese began to form her own impression of Julia. She'd never quite understood the angst between Julia and Vincent anyway; a first love that by now should surely have been put to rest.

Seated in a window seat on white wicker chairs Therese feigned nonchalance as trolleys of sweets, sandwiches and samosas were presented for their perusal. As their cups and plates were filled, and they brought each other up to speed on their first

impressions of India, Therese got the distinct impression that Julia had something more pressing to talk about.

After a lull in the conversation she said, 'Did Vincent tell you I broke up with my boyfriend?' Therese who had reread Vincent's latest letter several times could honestly say that he hadn't. In fact contrary to his usual scathing but hilarious accounts of his most recent antics, his letter was unusually perfunctory, definitely with no mention of love lives, his or anyone else's. A previous postcard had however mentioned that Julia and 'Bretty' were on the rocks. Therese sipped her tea, 'No, I haven't heard from him for a while.' Not even sure why she'd lied, she continued, 'Are you very upset?' Julia looked at her as if she was a bit dim.

'So... how long were you together?' Therese tried for a more conciliatory tone.

'Two years! My longest relationship ever, apart from Vincent! And he's left me for a man! An old one!' Therese didn't comprehend. She definitely hadn't heard this part of the story. Julia continued, 'He's living with him, his lecturer- in some Birchgrove warehouse! I still can't quite believe it.'

'What does he teach?'

'Video or film or something!'

'So you jumped on a plane to Delhi?'

'Yeah, I'm hoping to get a job in London; but thought I'd "get my head together" on the way.'

'I'm pretty sure you can pick up a cheap ticket to Europe from here.'

A waiter, resplendent in the hotel's signature, green safari jacket was hovering, hanging on Julia's every word.

'I already have one!'

'But madam, madam! My father is an agent for the travelling.' Flustered, he fumbled in his pocket, and pulled out a business card. Therese and Julia, amused by the hand drawn aeroplane smiled encouragingly.

‘Yes madam, wonderful prices, first class for the carrying!’  
He was so excited he overfilled their cups, before proceeding to bark at an underling, demanding he change their tablecloth.

‘So you’re friends with Anna aren’t you?’ Julia continued.

‘Yeah, sort of, I met her through Peter. I’m hoping to meet up with her in London, if I don’t run out of money first.’

‘Peter? Isn’t he the cute, guitarist in ‘Nothing Left?’

‘Yep. So didn’t Anna live with you and Vincent at Darling Street?’ asked Therese.

‘For a while! That was a bad time –Vincent and I were breaking up.’

‘Sounded like a fun house.’

Julia looked perplexed

‘Before the break-up I meant.’

‘I suppose, except I was trying to do law at the time. What a joke that was!’

Therese encouraged Julia to go on.

‘Anna didn’t help much, she was supposed to be studying, and Vincent painting but really they just drank, smoked dope and talked shit! If ‘Good Year for the Roses’ came on I’d know Vincent would probably stumble up soon. *They’d* both sleep till lunchtime of course. One night when he woke me up, I said that he may as well just sleep with Anna and he did!’ Therese raised an eyebrow; she’d never heard that one before. Julia continued, ‘I’m sure they’re in touch – they’re both good letter writers. Perhaps I’ll look her up in London.’

‘You should, she’s fun, probably knows heaps of people by now.’

Julia shrugged and changed the subject, ‘I hope I lose a bit of weight while I’m here...’ then, taking another cream cake added, ‘Especially since I’m single again!’

Julia was about five foot four and couldn’t have been much more than fifty kilos.

‘They say you can eat whatever you like in India without gaining weight but I think in just over a week I’ve managed to debunk that myth.’ Therese said refusing the piping hot scones the waiter was now offering.

‘Oh no.’ Julia said visibly concerned, but taking one anyway.  
‘Well I am on holiday!’

‘And you’re tiny! What? Fifty kilos?’

‘God no, I’m nearly fifty two!’

‘Oh well, you can always start drinking the water! This lecturer, is Brett the first student he’s...been with?’

The waiter standing to attention seemed to sympathise with Julia’s plight, though surely, thought Therese, his English didn’t stretch to the nuances of troubled relationships?

‘Is he good looking even?’

‘Not really! His name’s Geoffery, he’s tall and thin, kind of insipid, with straggly black hair, probably dyes it.’

‘And how old?’

‘Must be forty! Just about runs the film department.’

‘Are you sure Brett isn’t just using him?’

‘He is, but it’s hardly the point.’

‘Yeah, I guess. Would you have him back?’

‘God no! That’s why I’m here. Hey, would you mind not mentioning him to Vincent? If you’re in touch, that is.’

‘Of course!’

The waiter sensing a lull, returned, ‘Madam the *Gulab Jaman* is feeling very fresh today!’

‘Oh I couldn’t possibly!’ Julia placed her cutlery down indicating she was finished, imploring Therese to take one, which she did.

‘Oh they’re really good!’ Therese said, slopping the syrup as she offered the plate to Julia.

‘Oh they are!’ ‘I even helped write his bloody award winning script, you know!’



An hour and another pot of tea later, as the staff began to set the tables for dinner, with Julia grown more despondent, Therese suggested it was time they left. Therese still needed to settle her bill at the ‘Tourist Park’ and make reservations elsewhere.

‘Don’t go! You haven’t told me anything about *you* yet!’

After climbing the stairs to Julia’s room Therese sighed, undid the top button of her jeans and collapsed into the plush velvet armchair.

‘Oh this room is *so* nice! You should see my dump.’

‘Oh I know, not that I can afford it! So what happened with that cute guitarist?’ asked Julia.

‘We just...broke up’

‘Oh that’s a shame!’

Therese gave Julia a quizzical look.

‘Are you here to get over him?’

Therese laughed. ‘No! To be honest I don’t really think about him much. I’m mainly here to spend time in the desert, thought I’d take my paints and get lost in Rajasthan.’

‘Where?’

‘Rajasthan, it’s just south of here – the desert, with all the lakes and palaces.’

‘I don’t get it, he’s gorgeous and talented and you’re so blasé. Ah! So there’s someone else!’

Therese laughed again. Despite the Bretty saga, she was warming to Julia – and Vincent could be hard. ‘It’s been a while! And I was in Japan for six months.’

‘So – is there?’

‘Well I did have a tiny fling with a Mexican academic in Japan.’

‘Sounds exotic! I’m sensing something more recent though!’ Julia smirked.

‘I have made a *friend* here; it’s a little weird though!’

‘Do tell!’

‘His name’s Kossim.’

‘Go on!’

‘Well, he’s tall dark and handsome, a little older, actually his flat’s not far from here.’

‘He lives here!’

‘Cool! Where’s he from?’

‘Afghanistan.’

‘Ha ha!’

‘He is – he’s a refugee!’

Julia went quiet, then said, ‘What about his religion and stuff?’

‘He’s not religious.’

‘Are you sure?’

Annoyed, Therese said, ‘No I’m not *sure*. I’ve only known him a week.’

Julia not picking up on Therese’s tone persisted, ‘So... east meets west eh! And how was it?’

‘You mean the sex?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Not sure that I feel like talking about him now.’

‘Oh come on; sorry, I was just picturing you with a European!’

Julia’s apology was lousy but for Therese it was her first opportunity to sound out her feelings for Kossim. ‘Well the first time I was stoned and a bit unsure but then I thought why not; he’s gorgeous, his place was much cosier than my horrible hotel and I suppose I was in the mood.’ Therese’s voice trailed off. Julia looked up from filing her nails,

‘So there was a second time?’

‘Yep.’

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By Wednesday Therese had moved into The Star Palace and was dividing her time between Julia and Kossim, tending to spend late evenings and mornings at his place, before returning to The Star Palace by early afternoon. And even though it was fun going out

with Julia, they frequented the 'in' tourist cafes and restaurants where Julia made eyes at handsome, 'European looking' men, and was for a while anyway, able to forget Brett. But her tendency to criticise Therese's liaison with Kossim was beginning to grate. Then, on the way home from a late lunch at Gaylords, Julia declared she was deferring her ticket to London, which, as it turned out was paid for by her father, and would like to accompany Therese to Rajasthan.

As they reclined on the comfortable twin beds of the 'supreme deluxe suite' (Mr John had upgraded them), Therese began making vague plans for their trip, while Julia, oddly, began reminiscing about Vincent. Though pleased Julia wasn't being snide about Kossim, Therese was puzzled as to why she'd transferred the angst of her more recent debacle with Brett to him. After enduring another monologue about the hopelessness of romantic love (hers) Therese decided to visit Kossim, leaving Julia peeved that she'd be dining alone *again*.

Kossim's sadness as she elaborated on her proposed desert sojourn was so evident that she felt compelled to invite him, even though, particularly with Julia now in tow, she doubted that he would want, or more to the point, be able, to come. Clearly disappointed he drew her to him saying he'd wait for her, that she should enjoy herself; that it really was the most beautiful part of India. In contrast to his obviously intense feelings, all she could feel was guilt, quietly relieved when he assured her that he wouldn't be able to come. She pretended her relief was down to Julia, but knew it was more than that, and now that he was sensing her withdrawal he grew nervous, and began to ask tedious questions about her family. It was hard to explain to Kossim, estranged as he was from his mother, brother and sister, the ennui she felt about her own family. She thought about her own mother, an above average pianist and music teacher, upset about her recent divorce but refusing to admit it – a letter to her was well overdue, she'd only written one hasty postcard, and it was months ago, when she'd arrived in Japan. And as for her father, he'd tediously joked for years, that he was 'in his prime', and

now, with his new young wife (just twelve years older than Therese) it seemed he wasn't kidding. Kossim asked again about her brother and she managed a superficial account, 'I already told you, he's sporty and doing a science degree!' And though Kossim sensed they were out of sync, he persisted with his minor inquisition, 'So...what do you think you'll do when you finish art school?'

'Become a secretary!' she snapped. Taken aback, he tilted his head as if a different angle might shine a better light on this more petulant Therese. Realising he was flailing, Kossim stopped trying to appease her, and retreated to the kitchen to make tea. Her rancour had rattled him, but she was going away soon and he wasn't ready to lose her this easily. Reviled, once more, by his desperation, he returned with the tea and the gift he'd laboured long into the early hours to produce.

She had admired the sheer blue silk in a fabric shop on the way home from the Diwali festival and as he passed her the folded dress, Therese, now appalled by her capacity for rudeness, tried to blame it on the fact that she'd been rattled by Julia's proclamation that her affair with Kossim was 'inequitable'. She slipped into the dress and peered at her image in the cloudy mirror. The light was soft and the angle flattering. Her long hair; recently hennaed by mobile hairdresser, 'Raja the Beautiful' was messy, but shiny, and her skin glowed. Though he'd settled for a simple cut and had had to guess her measurements, it fit and fell perfectly.

Therese looked the best she had in ages but felt mean and small. Kossim was standing behind her and smiled at her reflection in the mirror. She turned to face him; he was taking this disappointment and her bad behaviour in his stride. Liking him much more than she liked herself, she suggested they go to the market, where she would buy the ingredients for dinner.

Her irritation had made him even more in awe of her, which in turn made her harder to read, so it was rather tentatively that he took her hand when she stumbled, stubbing her toe in a pothole. Grimacing, she avoided talking about her imminent travel and was

surprised when Kossim brought it up, even going as far as suggesting a couple of hotels. Until now he'd never mentioned travelling. But sensing his underlying despondency had not abated, she changed the subject. After returning to his flat the tension remained palpable, the only difference being that now it was *she* who was trying too hard. She wasn't sure why she sought to regain his approval, but suspected it was because she was afraid he had glimpsed her as she really was – just another bratty westerner. For his part, perhaps he was on the verge of resigning himself to the fact that the possibility of a relationship with her was doomed. Childishly or perhaps in the spirit of competition, she didn't want him to make this assumption.

She was fiddling with the tanboor, plucking it even though it was out of tune and it was Kossim's turn to be irritated. He began tuning it but was interrupted by the doorbell. Therese sat fidgeting, half listening to the muffled conversation, thinking she heard Didier's wheedling voice. Then when Kossim returned, instead of asking if it were he, suggested he play a song while she rolled a joint. He watched her, resisting the urge to smile. Uninspired, he had so far refused her requests to play, but this time he did. The notes were clear, the tone controlled and plaintive, as if parodying the power that shifted between them. Clearly a confident musician, she was struck again by his humility. Putting down the instrument he reclined on the cushions and re-lit the joint; his blasé smile, suggesting he might be sick of trying.

It worked. Now it was she that looked upon him, as in his element – he grew more elusive. She marvelled at the rapidity of her change of tack, as Kossim, who was partway to getting the measure of her, sensed that this rather more offhand attitude he was attempting, was much more to her taste. And he was right, well, mostly.

Kossim, as they both knew was at a practical disadvantage. For his part he longed to tell her that he wanted to get the hell out of India, that he was so depressed surrounded by unsympathetic Indians

and Afghans that were so disillusioned they routinely smoked themselves into a stupor. But, how not to scare her off? He loved her offhand attitude, balanced as it was by such quiet confidence and inherent optimism; in this she was exactly like *he* used to be; how he hoped Fila still was. He wanted her; not some slavish wife, but at twenty-four, by western standards she was still so young, probably too young to even consider a serious partner; let alone marriage. She had dispensed with that Peter with little or no trouble, seemingly because he played too much guitar. He would be more pleasing to Therese, he'd already taught himself English, and would learn more about how she liked to live. He wanted to explain that he hated kowtowing to the tourists, that though he knew it was distasteful, it had become his only recourse.

As Kossim sewed the shirts for those rude Italians he tried not to pin his hopes on Therese. He had been immediately taken with her, as he had been with Marianne. Perhaps this was a bad omen. Marianne, who at thirty-six, had been ten years his senior, had given him the run around for a good few months just after he'd first arrived in Delhi. He was more naïve then and it irritated him that he still struggled with that disappointment. He'd convinced himself, rather too hastily, that he was in love with her, and when he proposed marriage was pleasantly shocked that she'd accepted. They were planning to return to Paris together once they could organise his temporary visa, but it transpired that she was a most impetuous woman who preferred to live vicariously, and after several thwarted attempts at the French embassy, she'd soon tired of the Indian bureaucracy, and subsequently him. Kossim, distraught by this stage, persisted, coaxing her with gifts and flattery, insisting he take her to Rajasthan, Marianne's 'premiere' Indian destination. When they departed in a white ambassador, Kossim's friends treated it as a honeymoon of sorts, throwing garlands of marigold and jasmine. He had become the envy of his close-knit community, promising to help his friends emigrate once he had settled in Paris.

After just under a week however, Kossim had completely lost his allure with her, and would sit helplessly as she made eyes at other men, tourists mainly, in smoke filled cafes. She appeared so visibly bored with him, he felt he'd almost ceased to exist. By night though, when they'd retreat to the hotel rooms he could barely afford, things weren't so bad, as plied with hashish she'd acquiesce to his seduction. By the middle of the second week she'd run off to Poona with a German Bagwan devotee, leaving him stranded and humiliated in a Pushkar hotel. He would never forget the hotelkeeper's smirk as he handed him the scrawled postcard and explained, in front of a group of young Italian women, that Marianne had paid the bill.

Now Therese was going to Rajasthan with her friend. He'd love to go with her but could hardly afford it, nor did he feel auspicious about the desert, or this Julia. He finished the shirts for the Italians, tossed them in a bag and proceeded to the Tourist Park. At least he didn't have to worry about running into Therese there now.

The young Italian men were stoned and loud and made him feel venal as they counted out the money for the 'Afghani black' they'd already tucked into the pockets of their new cheesecloth vests. A guard passed just as the youngest of them was arguing with Kossim about the quality. 'Go see Didier then!' Kossim said under his breath. Though unsure if the guard had even heard Kossim slipped him enough rupees to make him forget the transaction.

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The day before they left for Rajasthan, Julia accompanied Therese to the jewellers. Re-visiting Old Delhi with Julia, seeing it through her eyes, Therese was surprised how fond she suddenly felt for this part of the city. The driver, like most Indians was eager to chat, and with his smattering of English, tried to coerce them into his friend's tailor shop. Therese told him that she'd bought one of those grandpa shirts just last week and already it was falling apart. 'Yes

madam! That is why you need another!’ He said, screeching to a halt in front of the shop.

Although Therese loved his wayward logic, she said ‘no’ firmly enough to give him little recourse other than to waggle his head and reluctantly drive on. Julia was impressed, Therese explaining that the matriarchal approach worked best here. Julia’s interest in Old Delhi was short lived alas, and before they’d even reached the jewellers she was digressing to Bretty. Although Therese felt slightly derisive: no doubt she’d be recounting Julia’s story to Vincent at a later date, she didn’t shy from offering tawdry advice, ‘Why not have a bit of a fling Julia, it might help.’

‘Oh I don’t know if I’m ready.’

Therese had it on good authority that Julia was quite a flirt, and, sensing that she was relishing the slant of the conversation said, ‘What about one of Kossim’s friends? Aziz is very handsome.’

‘Who?’

‘Aziz! I think you might like him.’

‘Another Afghan?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t think so. No offence!’

‘None taken! What about one of the hippies then?’

‘Like who?’

Therese’s annoyance meant she felt justified in having a little fun at Julia’s expense. ‘Oh I don’t know, Didier asked about you.’

‘Really! But I only met him that once at Gaylords?’

‘And he thought you were *very* attractive, *‘trés chic’* to be exact.’

‘God, I barely spoke to him.’ Therese was surprised on two counts; firstly, how pleased Julia was about Didiere’s compliment, and secondly, how dreadful her taste in men; perhaps with the exception of Vincent, seemed to be.

The taxi driver waited as they climbed the narrow staircase to the jewellers. Shanti was doubly delighted. As well as her payment, Therese had brought an attractive new prospect. He quickly turned



his attention to Julia, who, even though she'd been warned, was overwhelmed by the confines of the tiny room, with its pungent odour of metal and sweat. But by the time Shanti had presented Therese's ring, resplendent in its velvet box, Julia was sipping her second lukewarm chai and ordering a 'rare' emerald for herself.

On the way home from Old Delhi when Therese asked Julia if she wanted to come to Kossim's for dinner, she replied sulkily, 'I suppose so. As you know, I don't have any other plans.'

Therese had to remind herself again that Julia was still 'fragile'. 'You don't *have* to come, but like I said, I'm sure you'll find Aziz quite charming.'

'Only if you promise to get a cab home with me.'

'You mean I can't spend this last evening with Kossim?' Therese was incredulous.

'You know how I feel about travelling alone at night here!'

Therese relented knowing how disappointed Kossim, and to an extent, she too would be. 'Okay, I suppose it is our last night in the supreme deluxe suite.'

When they arrived at Kossim's Therese sensed a sort of generalised nervousness, one she put down to the presence of Julia, whom she proceeded to introduce, pleased that with a little prompting she could remember all of Kossim's friends' names. One by one, they stood to shake Julia's hand, with the exception of Aziz; who preferred to kiss her on both cheeks, which was, by Afghan standards quite forward. A little taken aback, Julia blushed before gathering her composure and squashing in next to Therese, who, as she moved along a little closer to Aziz, spied the new cutlery and aluminium plates, shining in the candlelight. She looked questioningly at Kossim, who smiled and with an ironic bow, said, 'For our special guests!' Feeling guilty that he'd gone to this much trouble, Therese wondered how many 'shirts' he'd had to sell to purchase them.

Julia was as keen as Therese had been to try out the hookah and the subsequent joints that this time, Kossim and his friends

didn't seem to hold back on. The men, relaxed and sated by the meal, stole the odd glance at Julia but seemed more interested in encouraging Aziz and Kossim to play music. Neither was in the mood, both waving off the repeated requests. A little later in the evening, after a few puffs on the hookah, Therese noticed Julia regarding Aziz's handsome profile as he talked to Faheem. He must have felt her gaze upon him because when he turned and beamed at her, she blushed again – but it seemed that Julia had lost her nerve, because before long she was yawning and intimating to Therese that she'd had enough.

Therese, who'd been doing most of the interacting, stifled a yawn. Kossim, of course, still hoped she would spend her last night in town with him, but as Julia had made it quite apparent that she was keen to leave, he doubted his chances. He knew offering to call her a taxi would be rude, and one look from Aziz had confirmed that he knew he had no chance with Julia. The noise level escalated and his friends, absorbed in conversation again, hardly looked like they were calling it a night. When the women made moves to leave Aziz put the hookah he was packing aside, stood up to kiss Therese goodbye nodded at Julia and went back inside. As they waited for a taxi Julia hovered awkwardly, averting her eyes as Therese and Kossim kissed, and she assured him she'd be back in a fortnight.

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Haunted by Kossim's resigned expression Therese sat silently as the rickshaw driver practised his English on a reluctant Julia. Kossim had made no proclamations but Therese had sensed he might have liked to.

'He's heartbroken!' declared Julia, breaking the silence.

'He'll be okay.'

'No, he's the serious type. I can see it in his eyes!' she persisted.

'I love his eyes!'

‘Yes but it’s the *way* he looks at you. You didn’t notice! You were so busy entertaining his friends. He’s in love!’

‘Oh... someone had to make the conversation. Why so quiet? When Aziz, who I know you thought was handsome, tried to talk to you, you barely spoke.’

‘I don’t know. That hash made me a bit paranoid, and besides I can’t understand them like you can.’

‘C’mon, Aziz’s English isn’t that bad!’

The rickshaw delivered them to their hotel, then, they swayed and bickered on the way to their room. Changing the subject Julia said, ‘I’ve got to admit though, Kossim is gorgeous; even if he does seem a bit...’ The woman on reception, immaculately turned out in a cerise and gold sari, raised an eyebrow when Therese said much too loudly, ‘A bit what?’

‘I don’t know – unhinged.’

‘He’s in exile with no money, no passport, and very little in the way of prospects!’

‘Oh...you should marry him!’

‘Ha ha! I do wish I could help him, he really is very nice...Vincent would like him!’

‘What’s he got to do with it? Apart from loving underdogs: especially ones with big blocks of hash. I think it’d be safer, not to mention more relaxing, to hang out with other tourists.’

‘Safer? That’s a little sad, anyway he is a tourist – a political one.’

‘Oh I think even Vincent would find the ‘cultural’ differences a bit... ’

‘A bit what?’

‘Well say Kossim was a woman and you were your average Aussie bloke – you’d be seen as taking advantage!’

‘I’ve hardly been forcing him.’ Therese was annoyed but because she was quietly looking forward to having a travel companion acquiesced, ‘I’m sure Vincent would put his own weird spin on it.’

Julia sighed sceptically as they got into the freshly sheeted, turned down beds, and then in an a more conciliatory tone than she intended, Therese said, 'I'm pretty sure Vincent still has a soft spot for you too, you know!'

---

They were at the train station browsing a newspaper stand, when an official tapped Julia on the shoulder and asked to see their tickets. When Therese presented them he shook his head, and smiling patiently, pointed to a queue at the opposite end of the station, 'Madam *this* is the authority to travel, for the tickets you must go there.'

'But we'll miss the train!'

'No madam the timetable is only for the guideline!'

Julia and Therese boarded the train an hour later, their second-class tickets, seemingly not much better than third. Their bags had been shuffled to outside one of the other carriages, and they were sharing two small bench seats with a mother, her three sons and an elderly gentleman who snored erratically. The air was stagnant, the only window plugged by the three small boys, squabbling as they tried to force their lanky bodies through its narrow opening. Their mother, who had given up refereeing, smiled apologetically. Julia had been right in suggesting first class tickets and Therese felt stupid for insisting otherwise.

After an hour or so Therese's claustrophobia was such that she had no qualms about barging through the crowd that had begun to congregate in the corridor. At the very back of it, she found a tiny unoccupied space that afforded a whisper of air. Julia was close on her heels, as was a train guard who sprinted towards them blowing smoke into their faces. 'Oh madams! So very busy today! First time in India?'

'Yes, are you one of the drivers?' Therese replied.

'No madam I am the number one assistant for the drivers. I am Rasa! You are going Rajasthan?'

‘Yes, do you think it’s possible to change our tickets to the first class?’ Therese sounding more wheedling than she’d intended, added, ‘I have travel sickness.’

‘Yes madam, the train is very full today, and the fans are not able to be spinning. I will speak to my friend and see if there is some possibility of promoting you for our first class.’ They both looked relieved, but when minutes later he hadn’t made a move, Therese prompted, ‘It would be great! If you would try...’ He stared at Therese’s new string purse and re-lit his cigarette. By now unsure whether to give him the money at all Therese said,

‘So how much for the tickets?’

‘Three thousand for the tickets and five hundred for the transferring’ When even more people came out for air and the tiny space they’d secured eluded them Therese counted out the money and handed it to him. Looking pleased, Rasa grabbed it, and disappeared towards the back of the train.

The three boys that had been fighting over the window were now running up and down the corridor, trampling on their bags so Therese dragged their luggage back into the compartment, where the boy’s mother was packing away the remains of their packed lunch. Meanwhile Julia had unwrapped the pakoras they’d bought at the station and noticing the mother’s eyes light up, offered her one. As she devoured it, Therese whispered, ‘Give her another, I think she might actually be starving!’ The woman grinned revealing two gold, and several missing teeth, and after Julia and Therese ate another two they insisted she finish them off. Then when her sons returned; to their visible disappointment, she gobbled the last one. A little later, just as Julia was settling into her novel, the smallest of the boys began a frenetic kicking, culminating in a great whack to her shins. When she yelped, and the mother screeching at the boys, banished them to the passageway, Therese exclaimed ‘Nice work!’

Now that the boys were no longer clogging up the window a trickle of a breeze intermittently wafted into the stuffy carriage; a relief as they’d resigned themselves to the fact that they’d lost their

ticket money. Julia was oscillating between fanning herself and reading ‘Dear Swami’ questions in *Femina*, an Indian equivalent of New Idea. ‘Oh God, this one’s about a girl who lives with her family of six in one room and has to fend off an oversexed brother.’

‘Yuk!’ said Therese, glancing up from *The Hindu* crossword.

‘What about this – a thirty year old, spinster’s father won’t approve her ‘love marriage’ to a French businessman’. The old man that had previously been snoring began to choke. Therese looked up unsure if they should call for help, just as the mother of the three boys began pounding him on the back; grinning as she did, until the man, seemingly without even waking, resumed his previous rattle.

‘Give us a clue then!’ said Julia.

‘‘Fit in’ spread with the first of flattery.’

‘Huh!’

‘It’s an anagram.’

‘Don’t get it!’

About a hundred or so rumbling kilometres later, just as they were giving up on a lacklustre game of travel scrabble (the tiny pieces kept sliding down the back of the seat) the guard appeared, ‘Madam, madam! I have the number one tickets. It was *very* difficult, but my friend has been able to find you the *premier* location in the number four, carriage. Please! Come with me.’ He was making quite a show of hauling their bags into the aisle; oblivious to the sleeping passengers he jostled in his wake. As they stuffed the rest of their belongings into their shoulder bags, Therese and Julia turned to see what the commotion was about – the train had broken out into a chorus of cheering and clapping. A dull whirring – the overhead fans had begun to spin! And though Therese felt like a defector, the deal was done – they were moving to ‘the first class’.

This part of the train was virtually empty, yet the guard seated them right next to a portly Indian, gentlemen, who was bent over his *Times of India* flicking a chunky ballpoint. The only other passengers were a well-dressed, elderly Indian couple and two young men, possibly English, who were half asleep. As Therese stowed

their bags she could see that the man, though he still had his pen in hand had not filled in one square. 'I dare you!' said Julia, who though she never did puzzles at home, had quite taken to them here.

Therese watched Julia settling into *Hotel Du Lac* as again she flicked through *Femina*. 'It's good isn't it, where are you up to?' Therese asked.

'I'm just getting into it. Don't you have anything else to read?'

'No, sorry, I'll try and have a nap.' Therese pretended to doze, occasionally stealing a glance at the Indian man and his discarded newspaper. He didn't seem friendly at all, in fact he barely even looked up, and if he did, would give just the most cursory of nods. The overhead fans in number four whirred with such industrial fervour that the tea-boy, handsome despite his grubby tan uniform, had to re-plaster his hair each time he ducked under their mighty force.

'Ah this is more like it.' Julia said, sitting down to stir the tea.

'Don't!' said Therese. Julia still hadn't gotten used to the fact that the tea was already sweetened beyond sickly. They shared the other cup as the conversation rolled back to Bretty.

'I've almost forgotten him, you know.'

'That's good! Because of a handsome tea-boy?'

Julia laughed and said in a false dramatic tone, 'If only that were all it took!'

The Indian man snorted, rifled through his briefcase, and finding nothing in it to amuse, resorted to his newspaper, which if nothing else, provided a vantage from which he could observe the antics of his fellow passengers.

The train rattled along and Therese, grown restless, began rummaging in her rucksack for her camera. Julia somewhat fidgety too, declared she was 'saving' the novel for later, and began stealing surreptitious glances at the lanky young man in the orange, tie-dyed T-shirt who had just woken up.

‘What are you up to?’ Therese said.

‘Nothing!’ Julia answered coquettishly.

‘Bet they’re Poms and I bet that’s the first time the tall one’s grown his hair!’

‘Huh?’

Julia pretended to study Therese’s travel book, and pointing at a picture of a lakeside palace, began reading the blurb, ‘Jodphur looks really nice – they call it the pink city!’

‘Stunning!’ said Therese. So far, Therese had done all the planning for the Rajasthan trip. When she had asked Julia how far south or west she thought they should go she’d shrugged and said she’d leave it up to her.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘You!’

‘Shut-up!’ said Julia coyly, intimating that she and Therese were sharing a private joke as the young man sashayed past.

This was his cue. ‘Er I think Jaipur is the pink one. Is that where you’re headed?’

‘No I think we’re going further.’ Julia trying to be offhand, turned to Therese and said, ‘Did I tell you that Brett’s film is short-listed for the Film Festival? I’m *so* glad I won’t be there.’

‘That’s impressive!’ Therese looked puzzled.

‘Like anything from the shop?’ the young man asked, ‘Cigars, cigarettes...?’

Julia tittered, and glanced at Therese who said, ‘Oh a beer would be nice.’

Surprised at Julia’s coyness, Therese thanked him as he bounced off down the aisle. Feeling somewhat magnanimous she continued, ‘I’ve heard a lot of that festival stuff is actually pretty average.’

‘Really! Have you ever been?’

‘Well – no!’

Though she sensed Therese’s boredom, Julia persisted ‘So...did you find the film people at Sydney College pretentious?’



‘No more than the artists! Is that where Brett goes?’

‘No, the one in Paddington! Anyway I’m sick of thinking about *him!*’ She declared, keeping an eye on the carriage door lest the Englishman return. ‘Vincent reckons you’re a good painter y’know.’

‘Really! He must have been out of it!’

‘Probably! But he did call you a natural.’

Therese, if a little embarrassed looked pleased, ‘So how long did you and he live together?’

‘About two years, straight after school.’

‘So did you finish law?’

‘Nuh!’

After presenting them with a bottle of beer each and a packet of Bombay mix, the Englishman smiled shyly, hovering in the doorway of their carriage. ‘Sit with us!’ Therese insisted, to the consternation of the Indian gentleman.

‘Thanks...is it okay if I invite my friend!’ Julia shrugged assent and as he bounced down the aisle, Therese said, ‘I thought you liked him?’

‘Perhaps – he’s cute. What were you saying about Vincent?’

Though Therese was sick of this conversation, as Julia had been kind enough to share Vincent’s compliment she decided to cut her a bit more slack, ‘That his scathing views might get exhausting, and that through his guarded veneer I did get the impression that you were the only one to have ever broken his heart!’

Though by now Julia wasn’t really listening she did tune in at this. Meanwhile the Englishman, and his sidekick were heading toward them. Therese had just disclosed a little more than Vincent might have appreciated, but somehow it seemed fair. Julia was beaming! Therese had just assuaged half her broken heart, and the young man, who introduced himself as ‘Miles’ looking miraculously more confident after half a Kingfisher, introduced Digby as they both sat down. Digby, getting in quite a tangle with his maps spread them out on the portion of the bench seat that remained, oblivious to

the consternation of the Indian man. Having established that they were all heading to Pushkar, Julia said to Therese, while Miles and Digby were discussing relative distances between major desert cities, ‘At least he takes the piss out of himself as well as everybody else.’ Ah – she was reminiscing *again*! Therese, of course wanted to know what she thought of Miles.

‘Yeah, he does. I just used to tease him if he got too full on!’ said Therese.

‘Really! About what?’ Julia grew most attentive.

Therese had a theory that when some couples broke up they became like rival siblings; with these two there was obviously more to it.

Miles and Digby feeling left out, studied Digby’s map and Therese asked them about their trip so far (a topic she considered best gotten out of the way early). They both spoke at once and, no surprise, Digby deferred to Miles. ‘A month, but we were in Thailand before that. What about you?’

‘Just over two weeks,’ Therese replied.

Julia smiled a secret smile. Miles could wait! He and Digby were still comparing their latest edition *Lonely Planet* with Therese’s ancient one and she was eager to quiz Therese about she and Vincent. There was one thing she’d never been able to ascertain about them and this was her chance, ‘So what did you tease him *about*?’

‘Oh I don’t know – how hot-headed he can be, how quickly he is to decide someone, usually another guy, is a dickhead.... that kind of thing.’ Julia looked puzzled. Everyone knew this about Vincent, such behaviour, for him especially, was hardly cringe-worthy?

Julia continued, ‘I get that he sees himself as superior to most men, but I wouldn’t have thought it was something to tease him about.’

Julia was growing in Therese’s estimation; she definitely wasn’t easily fobbed off. Therese smiled, her expression candid and

confidential; what she was going to say was an admission of sorts, or would be construed as one by Julia, 'Okay, so I'll tell you. I used to tease him about his confidence.'

'His confidence?'

'With women, how he understands women *so* much better than most men.'

'Still not something I would have thought you'd *tease* him about?'

'Okay. I used to tease him because he always reckoned he was such a good root!'

Julie repeated, 'A good root!' Then for the benefit of Miles and Digby who had tuned in, she giggled and said, 'Well of course, I taught him everything he knows! So did you and he ever...'

'Nah' said Therese, 'He just *told* me!' relieved that just as she answered, the train's brakes screeched and Digby, rosy from the beer, suggested a game of Scrabble.

Two games later, with Julia and Miles cosily teamed up and reigning champions they were nearing Jaipur. Though Therese was partnered with Digby she wasn't really playing. The beer had made her drowsy and he was happy to have her turn as she drifted off and stared out the window. When the train pulled in she noticed how stark the landscape had become – they were in the desert. It was dusk and the sky, turned inky, rendered the ochres and reds of the rocky terrain eerily metallic. In the distance were the lights of Jaipur and in the foreground spindly trees; inhabited by vultures, that were at once sinister and comical.

As Therese leaned out the window to photograph them the Indian man, who was getting ready to disembark, smiled for the first time. As he left he handed Therese his newspaper and a hotel business card. She was a little taken aback but would have been much more so, had she known he'd understood their every word. He bowed, and smiling at Therese said, 'I hope your adventure brings you much happiness!' and in a more concerned tone, said to Julia,

‘and I hope your loving life improves one hundred percent. Welcome to India!’

Embossed in gold the picture of ‘Hotel Pushkar Palace’, with its fake minarets and colourful stucco walls was appealing. Miles and Digby though they had planned to get off in Jaipur had ‘spontaneously’ decided to continue on to Pushkar. Julia bought more beer and suggested they play cards. They agreed on euchre but ended up teaching Miles and Digby how to play five hundred, then, just as Digby was finally getting the hang of ‘misere’ the train pulled in to Ajmer. It was a bus ride to Pushkar but Miles sweet-talked a taxi driver to take them for a reasonable price and with no other hotel in mind, they directed him to the Pushkar Palace.

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The change of pace as well as having Miles as constant companion suited Julia quite well. Her complexion glowed and she hadn’t mentioned Vincent, Brett or the lecturer in days. When Therese teased her about being involved with a Pommy public school boy she declared there was *much* more to him than that. Which in fact there was. He was confident, sporty, studying economics at Cambridge and was slightly smug about Australians. Julia said the ‘smugness’ was down to his sense of humour. Therese had nothing in common with Digby, except that they both liked taking photographs and she couldn’t help thinking of him more as Miles’ valet than his friend. Over *biyrianis* he tried hard to interest her. But technique and camera models were not her forte. Even the bung lassis didn’t make him any more amusing, except to Julia who after half a glass would giggle at almost anything.

After a few days, Therese decided to leave Julia, Miles, Digby and the ‘Pushkar Palace’ for a cheaper room at the Kanhai Haveli, which, though further from the lake, was a beautiful old building with two sleepy dogs and an even for India, homely, eccentric atmosphere. When shown to her pink and gold room by Ada, the owner’s daughter, Therese decided on a whim to stay a

couple of weeks. Ada also offered to rent her a bicycle. Not only was Therese feeling more at home than she'd felt in a while, she was also inadvertently making it easier for Julia and Miles to run off together; hopefully taking with Digby with them. Julia, though a little embarrassed by what was evidently the full flush of love, promised to meet Therese back in Delhi, or failing that, London.

It was already so hot during the day here that excursions needed to be undertaken before ten or after four and luckily the general store had a reasonable collection of paperbacks. She bought *The Dice Man* and *Still Life With the Woodpecker* and, surprisingly, a roll of good quality drawing paper. On her second afternoon at the Kavali, she got the urge to paint and spread her compact kit; a children's set of acrylics and the tubes of gouache she'd bought in Japan on the tiled floor of the small verandah. Now that she was painting again she wished she hadn't been so offhand when Kossim had offered to take her to that art warehouse.

Then realising it was the first time since leaving Delhi that she'd properly thought about him, she repressed her uneasy guilty feelings, preferring to flick through the photographs she'd developed before leaving Delhi for inspiration. The one of him with Ganeesh had potential. The one of the manic rickshaw driver was better. She cut some paper (scissors courtesy of Ada) and began sketching a vulture, imagining as she did how things might have been if Kossim had come. She knew she shouldn't have promised that she'd see him in two weeks. Affected by the beauty of the desert and the gaudiness and ornament of everything Indian, she expanded on the faux, post-modern style she'd been experimenting with at home. The vulture became another Hindi God, one she adorned with trinkets and gold. Then she drew another, and then another. Before long a flock of them floated across a sparse, 'Spaghetti Western' landscape.

Therese's version of Indian kitsch seemed to appeal to the pot-bellied, owner of the hotel who had taken to loitering around her verandah on the pretext of sweeping and dusting. After exclaiming, 'Oh madam, I am very experienced with the artists. Wait! I am

coming back shortly!’ he tottered off, returning an hour later, with two men and sporting a much more businesslike demeanour; as the three pored over the two paintings she’d completed. The next day Therese had her first international commission. She was, for room, *half* board and the hefty sum of two thousand rupees to paint a mural on the sidewall of the ‘Pushkar Palace’. She wondered why, as her hotelier, he was happy to lose her business, but supposed some sort of deal had been struck.

Pleased, though apprehensive about their expectations, she packed her bags and moved again. This time she was given, as well as some tins of paint, a ‘premier’ room with a view of the lake, and a much larger verandah, complete with a barrel of monkeys. She lay on the slightly lumpy, large, bed that was to be hers for the next two weeks, listening to the screech of the muezzin and again thought of Kossim. She should write to him. With Julia gone she could even invite him; but did she want to? Of course his physical presence would be pleasant... but would the brief and gauzy intimacy they’d shared in Delhi transpose to here? This once pilgrim’s destination she was holed up in, grown touristy in recent years, would be much more her world than his. She wrote him a postcard.

*Dear Kossim,  
November, 1985*

*19<sup>th</sup>*

*Have a painting job, staying desert longer so not  
coming back to Delhi.  
Will probably go straight to London from Bombay.  
Have enclosed photographs of Diwali and you,  
Therese*

A little harsh but she knew she didn’t want him to come; for once she really was enjoying her solitude. She was pleased too, to have lost Julia; even though they’d mostly gotten on, and had had enough in common to amuse more than irritate each other.

A week later Therese fixed the broken basket onto her bicycle and rode into town. It was six and the perfect time to view

the lake in all its shimmering glory. She was buying vegetables at Raj's Grocer when she saw him. Looking forlorn and anxious, he was across the road, slumped in the doorway of the Hotel Everest. Casting her eyes downward she drew her thin mauve scarf across her face, then, to the dismay of the shopkeeper, left the items she'd selected on the counter, before slipping out into the street.

## It's Me She's Angry With

### *And I Love You So*

Anna changed into a swimsuit, tossed a sarong and book into her bag and followed the Grand Continental's cobbled pathway to the kidney-shaped pool. As she passed the bar – a faux grotto, festooned with moss and a tangle of vines, she scoped out the clientele and the deckchair situation. Just behind the yellow hibiscus, secluded and perfect for a perusal, would do nicely. After adjusting her sunglasses she watched as waiters in white suits jostled with scantily clad cabana boys, as they attended to their guests, all of whom were coiffed and oiled, and variously sprawled upon the zebra sun lounges.

Anna was trying not to stare at the elegant woman across the pool, who with the platinum blonde bob and long legs crossed just so, bore an uncanny resemblance to Zsa Zsa Gabor. Catching Anna's eye as she raised a flared sleeve to retrieve her cigarette case, the woman smiled, just as a cabana boy dashed over to light her cigarette. When Anna, slightly embarrassed, smiled back, the fiftyish man alongside her winked. 'Oh no' she thought shrinking behind her novel – as affectedly he proceeded to remove his polka dot beach-jacket, before clicking his fingers at the retreating cabana boy. With his dishevelled shock of hair, aviator sunglasses, and now requesting 'their best' bottle of champagne, Anna half wondered if he just might be Roman Polanski.

*In Cold Blood*, though almost as gripping the second time round, was proving to be no match for the sideshow that had begun to play out across the pool – as three young women in skimpy bikinis feigned surprise when a bottle of 'Dom' was placed at their table. Anna had no idea what to expect of this trip, the location was of course exotic but working for a family, well she had her reservations. The confidence and disdain of these seasoned resort dwellers was



compelling. Nobody except the two women dangling matching coral toenails, was in the pool and apart from the splash of the fountain and the tinkle of ice the afternoon was eerily silent. She was up to page thirty when a jazz trio began to set up on a small stage. ‘And I Love You So’ had almost sent her to sleep when an Adonis-like man, with skin so bronze it glittered, enquired if she’d like something from the bar. Noticing his be-ringed hands, beautifully manicured nails and the tiny, pink flamingo tattoo on his thigh, she was surprised when his gaze seemed to linger for longer than seemed decorous upon her pale, and thanks to another London winter, ample body.

‘I’m Troy, what’ll it be honey?’

‘A lime daiquiri please!’

‘Coming up!’

Anna glanced at the pool. Diamonds of sunlight danced across its flat surface and as the temperature had climbed to twenty-eight she was bemused that nobody seemed the least interested in having a dip. She stretched, stood up, and sensing a few sidelong glances dived in. After a few laps of lazy breaststroke, somewhat quelled by the languorous poolside atmosphere, Anna smoothed her hair back and retired to her deckchair.

Troy returned with the cocktail, and a bowl of pretzels, under which he placed a discount voucher for ‘Bettina’s Bikinis’. Say you’re a friend of mine!’ he whispered. Could he have mistaken her Brick Lane, vintage swimsuit for a hand-me-down? It was proving difficult to decipher any sense of *chic* here.

The combination of the cocktail, the heat and the soporific trickling of the fountain soon made page turning so laborious that she joined most of the other guests in a siesta. It must have been an hour or so later when the woman she was thinking of as “Zsa Zsa” tapped her on the shoulder and proclaimed, ‘*Vous etes très rouge*’. Her name was Eva, and in a most endearing accent, she confided that she escaped the Austrian winter most years, adding, as an after thought, that she was recently widowed. And when Anna said she

was on her way to Tortola, to work for the Palmer's, Eva exclaimed that the island was *divine*, and 'what a coincidence' her friend Marguerite had a small villa there.

'You must go to, what was it called? Ah, 'The Bomba Shack'. It's *wunderbar*! On the beach at Smuggler's Cove, music all night – be careful though, a few rogues frequent it...why even at my age...'

Anna looked interested. 'Really, you mean the islanders?'

'No, well yes, some – but more the sailors!'

"Polanski", looking tired after a long day in the sun, attempted an enigmatic stare as he strolled past. Eva giggled, even more so, when Anna suggested he might be a film director.

'I doubt it darling, I've never seen him before in my life!' Enjoying the late afternoon sun as they sipped a second and then a third cocktail, Anna's impression of the hotel improved considerably.

'Do you miss your husband?' Anna asked, after a lull in the conversation.

'Darling, to tell you the truth, not as much as I thought I would. Does that sound awful?'

'No!' Anna laughed. 'But I'm hardly an authority on husbands.'

'Of course – you are still so young!'

'Were you married long?'

'Three years darling, but Frederick was my fifth! We were on a houseboat in Cashmere when he took a turn. Of course we flew straight to Geneva – the doctors tried – but there was nothing they could do.'

'I'm sorry!'

'Don't be! I'm really quite happy and I wouldn't mind some company this evening. Do you have dinner plans?'

As it was Anna's last night of 'freedom' she agreed to accompany Eva to what Eva assured her was the 'best little bistro in Antigua'. After slipping into a long blue halter dress, she met Eva in

the foyer, where Eva already had a taxi waiting to take them to the restaurant. Anna wondered if Eva was always this vivacious. The waiter, whom she appeared to already have at her beck and call, sat them at the best table, served complimentary champagne and canapés, and hung off Eva's every word. Then after dinner, they continued on to a jazz bar, where the pianist performed a few old standards and didn't seem to mind their joining in, even though Anna, and it seemed, Eva, were beyond distinguishing whether their antics were annoying or hilarious. After a stint on the dance-floor with Mario and Fernando, two Italians somewhere in their late forties, they returned to their table, with Anna still trying to guess Eva's age. Though she didn't look much over forty she had mentioned being a teenager during the war and that her only son, Maximillan, held a prominent position in the Vienna Philharmonic.

Eva popped a cigarette from her case, and with it still unlit, leant in and said, 'I'm fifty-five today Anna, thank you for a wonderful birthday!' then taking Anna's hand, and lowering her voice, she asked, 'Now tell me darling, are you in love?'

A little taken aback, Anna said, 'Not really, I have a sort of a boyfriend in England. It's very new; he's Irish. What's your secret Eva? Five husbands and you could pass for thirty- five!'

'For the looks...a tiny bit of surgery, and darling as far as men go well I think it was Zsa Zsa Gabor who said, 'you never really know a man until you divorce him!' and perhaps she's right – but you can have fun in the meantime!' Eva paused and touching her immaculately coiffed hair, batted her eyes at Mario, who though he'd returned to his seat, remained transfixed. Then, a touch theatrical, she whispered, 'I think the main thing is that you never act too interested. "Playing hard you say, no?" '

'Yes!' Anna laughed. 'So do you think you'll marry again?'

'No darling, it felt ridiculous even the third time, but Frederick was so insistent; he'd only been married once and not happily.' Her voice trailed off and for the first time Anna sensed that perhaps Eva was grieving, if fleetingly.

The waiter brought their drinks bill and when Anna tried to pay Eva laughed, insisting that even if she lived another fifty years she couldn't make a dent in Frederick's legacy. Though by now Eva had released Anna's hand, Anna couldn't take her eyes off her large emerald that flashed in the lamplight. Then Eva, grown contemplative, sipping cognac, confided 'You know Anna, when it comes to love there really are no new moves.'

The next morning the hotel's receptionist rang at eight to inform Anna that her bar tab had been settled, that a package awaited her at reception and that her taxi would be here shortly to take her to the airport.

### *Angel of the Morning*

Dwayne was her pilot. Tall, sixtyish and proffering a large freckled hand, he escorted her to the runway, (which was really no more than a strip of grass), where they boarded a tiny plane. Wearing cowboy boots and a 'Miami Vice' shirt, Dwayne exuded neither the demeanour nor the efficiency Anna associated with pilots. When she refrained his offer to sit in the cockpit he looked disappointed, and as his steely eyes peered into hers, she couldn't help thinking him more suited to a part in some B-grade Western.

After also refusing his offer of a drink from the mini-bar, he stowed her duffle bag and poured himself a large Wild Turkey. The plane seemed to ascend quickly, despite the turbulence and when Anna looked down to the sea below and tightened her seatbelt he said, 'Just you and me kid!' then noticing the 'Grand Continental' gift bag on the seat beside her, affected an irritating teasing tone, 'Secret admirer eh?'

Anna mumbled no, nervous that Dwayne seemed so easily distracted. As she opened the bag a Bettina's, psychedelic swing-tag and a piece of notepaper fell out— surely it wasn't from that Troy? Dwayne grinned. The note was from Eva, outlining her contact details in Austria, and her 'poste restante' destination: Barbados.

Gazing out the window Anna imagined her breezing into Bridgetown, as she half listened to Dwayne's Texan drawl, at once soothing and monotonous, as he gave his bland commentary of the archipelago below.

The turbulence grew worse and to take her mind off the flight she began recounting her culinary career to date. Until the job at Crystal the 'indie' record label conceived by her boss, John Palmer, she'd mainly been whipping up 'pigs in a blanket' and 'devils on horseback' for Sloane Rangers in 'Jilly Squire's Clapham Kitchen'. She could often be seen at Ascot or 'the rugger', bedecked in yellow stripes, discreetly wrestling with hors d'oeuvres that had come adrift in the back of the transit van on the trek out from Wandsworth. The job at Crystal studios had been a step up, this two-month sojourn on Tortola an unexpected bonus.

John Palmer, though not exactly handsome, had serious charisma. Slightly rheumy eyed, and with a candid sideways smile he reminded her of Michael Caine, a fact she mentioned to him one morning when he was hiding in the kitchen avoiding Natasha, a Welsh 'new-waver' that he'd decided *not* to sign. Laughing off the slightly awkward compliment as he left with two pieces of chicken pie, Anna was surprised how flattered he seemed. Nobody at the office talked about John's family and Anna would have probably assumed he was a bachelor, had she not, whilst preparing lunch at his Knightsbridge rooms one morning, chanced upon photos of his wife, Monique, and their two infant children. Not quite so prominent was another photograph, of a sultry teenage girl. Unlike most of the other men in the industry, John didn't appear to flirt with the talent or the office staff. And, leaving the administration to Barry, who was tone deaf, left him free to spend his time in the recording studios, where he never ceased to take delight in deciding what did or did not make the cut. And though he was always happy to celebrate, the parties were really for the others. As for drugs, he'd have the odd puff on a joint but didn't appear to indulge in cocaine and pills like the rest, although two of the older producers had twice alluded to

‘that God awful morning at The Half Moon in Putney’. Anna assumed his restraint of late was health related; he must, after all, have been on the wrong side of forty. Always friendly, he also tended to be a little paternal; a trait Anna found surprisingly endearing. She’d even noticed him flinch one evening when she’d witnessed Teddy, a sound technician, snorting a line off the plate of his untouched egg sandwich.

Anna hoped some of the new American artists might be staying on the island. Sarah, John’s secretary, had told her that Bobby Bridle had been hiding out at the Palmers’ all month, trying to ‘get himself together’ for his upcoming tour, but she had also mentioned that when Monique was in residence the guest list, and especially ‘the talent’ was almost always, severely curtailed.

The turbulence was abating. ‘Should be nice and smooth from here!’ Dwayne said, before launching back into his life story that had begun on the ranch with his alcoholic single mother, and ended with his failed marriage to an almost famous, country singer. Anna, pretending to doze, was picturing him in the arms of Juice Newton. Then, resigned, Dwayne grew pensive, sipping as discreetly as a pilot can from a burnished hip flask. Anna was about to ask him if he knew ‘Angel of the Morning’ when the plane jolted, alarmingly. She’d found the haul from London to Antigua tedious, with its two delays and a diversion, but this last flight was proving to be the most unnerving.

‘God Damn!’ Dwayne snarled as he dropped his hip flask, again turning to see if he had Anna’s attention. Annoyed, she continued to pretend she was dozing, then, cursing a wind current, Dwayne suddenly changed direction, seemingly causing the plane to plunge dramatically. Though the descent must have only lasted moments, imagining she sensed Dwayne’s fear, Anna felt her stomach clench violently. Minutes later however it seemed they’d landed at Tortola and Dwayne was slicking back his stringy hair in preparation to disembark.

After dashing to the toilets Anna's colour improved, as once again she could contemplate a future. The airport surrounded by the same lush vegetation and azure sea was much smaller than the one in Antigua and as she walked across the tarmac, towards the taxis she heard two women arguing in French, reminding her that she would soon be meeting the elusive Monique. Anna envisaged her as a sophisticated Parisian perhaps a touch bohemian, with a no doubt glamorous and extensive social set. Having recently been to the West End version of *Le Liaisons Dangereuses* she was tending to imbue all of France with its signature salaciousness, and as she and John seemed to spend so much time apart she assumed their marriage was a 'modern' one.

'Anna?' A handsome if slightly bland young islander in a Yankees cap interrupted her reverie, introduced himself as Kit, and hauled her luggage into the back of a red Mini-Moke.

'Y'all right?'

'I am now that I'm back on the ground!' Anna, let her head loll against the back of the bucket seat.

'Let me guess – Dwayne was your pilot?'

'Yes!'

Kit laughed. By the time they got to town, the local market was in full swing and Anna leant out of the Moke, taking in the spicy aroma that emanated from the food stalls. 'Smells delicious!'

'Jerk chicken! Want some!' Kit said, slowing down.

Loud reggae music jangled from competing ghetto blasters, as people, wearing a fusion of garish floral and muted batik that both clashed yet matched with their American T shirts and Levis, relaxed under the shade of frangipani and Moreton Bay fig trees, as they watched the children playing cricket.

'Oh! It's so...' Anna began.

'Beautiful?' said Kit.

'Yes!' He laughed. 'Maybe for you! I'll take New York!'

'Have you been there?'

‘Nah, furthest I been is Puerto Rico.

‘You?’

‘Nope, closest was Miami, the day before yesterday!’

‘You like reggae?’

‘Sure – I hear it’s pretty good round here!’

‘It’s okay!’

Kit rummaged through the console, put on a Peter Tosh tape and began singing along with ‘Legalise It’. He was hamming it up a bit, which sort of worked, and by the time the second song came on he pulled out a crumpled joint, which he lit, eying Anna coyly. After a somewhat theatrical drag he offered it to her and she declined.

‘Go on! I won’t tell!’ he teased.

‘Okay then!’

They’d been winding around hairpin bends for about four kilometres happily not talking. Apart from the winding road ahead all Anna could see was dense vegetation, and the odd rocky outcrop, and as they snaked around each corner, the sheer drop to the sea below. The buzz of insects and the raucous bird song was resonating in a way that made Anna felt slightly disorientated, or perhaps Kit’s joint was kicking in? He smiled and thinking she was marvelling at the view said,

‘Wait till you see the house!’

A long driveway flanked with red poinsettia, wound down to a white, modernist building. The way it was bunkered into the side of the hill seemed intended to afford a semblance of discretion but as they got closer, it became evident that the scale and glamour of ‘Haute Vue’ belied any attempt at understatement.

### *A View to Kill*

Kit escorted Anna inside. Two women, who’d been sprawled on the outdoor sunbeds looked up and smiled. Anna was struck by their poise; as smoothing their faded sarongs, they rose to greet her. Kit introduced his mother, Grace and her sister, Letitia. Both looked



about forty, and though solidly built, seemed girl-like as they padded across the marble floors, their bare feet thwacking rhythmically. Kit offered to show her around. The kitchen, located between the pool and the living areas, was equipped with the latest in European appliances, and though it was all white, stainless steel and slightly sterile, there were, just outside of it, two huge rattan lounges piled with cushions that faced out to the pool. Anna leant out of the long wide window above the sink. It was the kind of view that people drove miles for. Below was an informal dining area and adjacent to that was the upper level of the pool, which, terraced into the side of the hill, cascaded over three levels, its edges blurred by sprawling purple and yellow hibiscus. And beyond it Anna could trace a jagged line to the coast below. Letitia, who was grinding coffee, smiled.

‘It’s so beautiful!’ Anna sighed.

‘Yes the number one house in my village.’ Letitia laughed.

Anna smiled, unsure if she was being ironic, and followed them out to the pool.

Grace and Letitia who had settled on one of the rattan lounges with coffee were smiling at Kit’s attempts to impress Anna.

‘Have a swim if you like,’ he said, glancing proprietarily at the pool. ‘It’s an ‘infinity’!’

‘A what?’ Grace looked puzzled.

‘I told you before – it’s an infinity – from France!’

‘No you didn’t!’ Grace argued.

‘Oh ma I did.’

‘It’s quite spectacular! I would love a swim, but wouldn’t mind unpacking first. When does John arrive?’ Anna was keen to see where she was going to be living for the next two months and what level of privacy she was to be afforded.

‘Tonight, I’m picking them up. I should go and clean the car!’

‘We already done it!’ said Grace, tossing him the keys.

‘The bungalow is ready, shall I take Anna down?’ asked Letitia.

‘No auntie! You enjoy your coffee I can go,’ Kit picked up the heavier of Anna’s bags, and led her down through the garden. Behind a tangle of poinsettia and bougainvillea were three bungalows, all with high-pitched thatch roofs. Set about twenty metres apart, each was nestled into the side of the hill, affording expansive views across the island to the sea and the rest of the archipelago. Already pleased with her level of seclusion, when they approached the verandah complete with hammock and armchairs, Anna could hardly believe all this space was to be exclusively hers. Inside the white plantation doors, the room with its sparse furniture, rattan matting, linen drapes and seventies abstract paintings represented a level of comfort and taste that Anna aspired to but had never come close to attaining. And that was before she’d ventured into the bathroom! With its Japanese bath, open shower and bidet it was luxurious by any standard. After Kit left her to settle in, she lay on the king sized, bed watching geckos skirt along the rafters as she acclimatised to the sounds of her new abode, similar birdsong and cicadas as in Antigua, as well as a constant sloshing – the pool filter perhaps? She tried on the swimsuit from Eva; with its sleek fabric and elegant cut it was really quite flattering, and if she tilted the bathroom mirror a little, it was even more so. Coiling her thick brown hair on top of her head she scrutinised her face. The light was soft but the scar that split her left eyebrow was still obvious. It was nearly four years since she’d slid across the table at that damn cocktail party in Chippendale. In this light her eyes appeared greener than they were, and her face like the rest of her was rounder than she preferred. If only she were more like her petite English mother. But alas, she resembled the rounded Mediterranean women on her father’s side. She opened the bar fridge pleasantly surprised to see that it was fully stocked. After considering mineral water she opted for a beer instead, (she’d begin austerity measures tomorrow) then after taking in her view, first from one of the chairs and then from

the hammock, she went back inside to unpack. She threw a loose shirt over her new swimsuit, and on her way up to the house, thought about what Eva had said – she hadn't seemed a cautious woman, not the least maternal, yet she'd seemed intent on issuing warnings *the rogues, be yourself...there are no new moves?*

After reclining on one of the rattan lounges she dived into the pool and swam to the outer side, adjacent to the cliff edge. When she emerged, hoisting her elbows onto the pool's smooth, white marble surrounds, she peered down. Staring at the sheer drop, (of course there was a discreet safety platform) she felt a sort of déjà vu, or perhaps she was just beginning to acclimatise to Haute Vue. But then when she looked up to where the house should have been all she could see was white, tent-like wall. After diving under the water again (as if this might re-configure things), she re-emerged to see Kit giggling and waving a black remote about. Then with a slow *brrrrr* the wall began to pleat up, concertina style, again, revealing the inside of the house. This kind of wealth was different to any she'd been privy to in Australia – at once flashy and tasteful, it felt very American. Kit seemed younger now, gauging her reaction, as he capered across to the stereo.

Anna was sunbathing when Grace and Letitia came out to the patio. They'd changed into blue gingham shifts; a sort of uniform she supposed, and had their frizzy black hair pulled back in tight buns. Letitia poured iced coffee, and Grace offered her a plate of sliced mango. She was beginning to wonder if they thought she was on the guest list, and when she objected to their fussing, Letitia laughed, patting her on the head, before sauntering back inside to 'fix the linen'.

After Anna had lain in the sun, listening to Kit deejay for about an hour (she didn't have the heart to tell him the same studio tapes were on high rotation at the London studios) she decided she'd familiarise herself with the kitchen. When she went inside Kit was sprawled across one of the cream leather lounges, fiddling with a set of over sized headphones. As he gazed up at her she couldn't quite

gauge his expression – his big brown eyes seemed equally impish and seductive. Obviously posing, he adjusted his posture, folding his arms behind his head and stretching out his long toned legs. Was he being ironic – he must have known that he looked good. He began laughing, and deciding he was really too boyish to be sleazy Anna ascribed his ambiguous demeanour to the pot.

‘What?’ she felt forced to enquire.

‘Nothing!’ His tone was coquettish, and (was he joking?) he was batting his eyelashes. Then, after a deliberate pause, ‘You think you could get me a job in London?’

‘At Crystal?’

‘Nah – in a club or something?’ As he stood up, his T-shirt; air brushed with a silhouette of Bobby Bridle’s blonde bouffant, rode up to reveal an enviably flat stomach.

‘So did you like Bobby?’

‘Not much!’ Kit recounted that Bridle, who had left just a few days ago, apart from absconding with Monique’s monogrammed towels, had been rather a non-event.

After checking the pantry and fridge; which were empty save for wine and champagne, Anna asked Kit, who by now was perched backwards on one of the kitchen stools shelling peanuts, if he thought the Palmers would be arriving in time for dinner.

‘I’m picking them up at six now, they were supposed to be here before you, but apparently there was a delay in Miami. John will be hungry, Monique’s probably on a diet and I’m not sure about the others...’ He rummaged in one of the kitchen drawers, pulled out a wad of American bills, ‘Let’s go! I nearly forgot, the market will close soon.’

Though Anna went to sit in the passenger seat, Kit insisted that she drive, laughing delightedly when she stalled the Moke. She was explaining that she hadn’t driven for two years when ‘We Are The World’ came on.

‘Oh bloody Geldorf!’

‘Fraid so!’ Kit groaned dramatically, trying to find another channel. But as there were only ads and more ‘Live Aid’ he rummaged through the console and put on Bobby Bridle’s latest ‘demo’.

‘Thought you didn’t like him?’ Anna teased.

‘I don’t! His music’s okay though!’

‘He must have gotten up to something in a whole month?’

‘Nuh! He just slept. Never once even picked up the guitar he sent me all the way to St Kitts for!’

‘He might have been depressed!’

‘Dunno! I heard he was a hit in Roadtown one night though!’

By the time they’d done the shopping, had a couple of beers and Anna had quizzed Kit on his stock of celebrity antics, (of which he was not very forthcoming) she asked about the Palmer’s previous cooks, at which he shrugged, looked mildly amused and put on a Talking Heads tape.

### *Paranoid*

‘So do they *always* bring a cook?’ Anna persisted.

Kit turned the music down. ‘Yep, and a nanny! Sometimes even an English gardener, even though that’s one of my jobs! Why?’

‘Just making conversation.’

‘They used to have Sophia, an Italian woman. John loved her, especially her ravioli, but she drank.’

‘Once in a Lifetime’ came on and he turned the music back up.

‘Oh. I’ll have to be careful then!’ and when she saw Kit looking puzzled, added, ‘Not to get too drunk?’

‘Oh yeah!’ He laughed politely. ‘Have you met Monique?’

‘Not yet, what’s she like?’

‘Different!’ Kit smiled. ‘From John!’

As they approached Haute Vue on their way back from the market a white limousine coming from the opposite direction, slowed to speak to Kit. Putting out the joint he’d just lit, he thanked

the limo driver, turned to Anna and said ‘they’ve arrived – must have got a charter!’

Hurrying to meet the Palmers, Kit arrived at the front door just in time to assist with the luggage, hoping as he did, that Grace and Letitia, weren’t still asleep by the pool. Kit overdid the brightness a little, which appeared to not be lost on John. Anna’s slight reticence about leaving London was all but gone – this island sojourn would at the least be entertaining.

‘Mr Palmer, I was supposed to pick you up...’

‘It’s okay Kit’ John said smiling, introducing Anna to the others, ‘This is Monique, Mildred our nanny, and my darlings, Claudine and Eliza.’

Anna smiled, murmuring hellos, but as it was such a shemozzle, with them all crushing into the hallway, only Monique responded. Anna watched, bemused, as Mildred tripped over the twins’ strewn luggage, just as Claudine, who’d scraped her knee on a piece of modernist sculpture in the entranceway, burst into tears. Monique, growing irritated, detached herself from the chaos to smooth her linen pantsuit. The twins, who must have been about three, and sporting matching nautical ensembles began tearing about, Claudine making a miraculous recovery as Mildred, perspiring in her striped, orange sundress tried to rein them in. When the twins refused to go upstairs with her and Anna offered to help, she was relieved that Mildred maintaining her purse-lipped position, looked aghast – the demarcation had been settled! Then when Kit addressed her, ‘Hey Milly! How’s it going?’ Anna couldn’t help noticing, how, blushing, she carefully composed her response.

‘I’m tired! It was *such* a long flight!’

‘Ooh!’ he said, feigning concern and winking at Anna as he slipped out the kitchen door. Twenty minutes later he was back, helping Grace, who *had* fallen asleep, carry in armfuls of cut flowers and more linen. Her gingham dress had been pressed and her beautiful brown feet were squashed into matching plastic sandals. Anna should probably have changed too, she was still wearing just

her shirt and new swimsuit. As Grace welcomed the family, Mildred shot her a tight little smile, more intent on quizzing Monique about whether she'd be having her 'usual' room. Monique, more concerned with procuring a daiquiri, asked Grace if any of the mangoes were ripe, just as Letitia arrived with a basketful.

Kit had taken the families' luggage upstairs but Mildred's was still in the hall. Puffing as she strained to pick up her white suitcase, she stared pointedly at Grace and Letitia, who both remained fixated on dusting and rearranging what was already in perfect order.

John and Monique moved out to the pool area, and as Anna served the drinks, John did his best to make her feel welcome, in between placating his still irritated wife and bickering children. Monique and Mildred sipped stiffly. Although Anna knew they were tired, she couldn't warm to either of them. Mildred was plain and dour and Monique, though pretty, in a spoilt, petulant kind of way was mostly imperious, speaking to Mildred in English and John in French. As Monique's nanny and seemingly constant companion, Anna thought it might have been the other way round – and hadn't John once told her he was hopeless with languages, even his own? (Anna's Aussie school French though rusty, was good enough to understand most of what John seemed to, though Anna saw no advantage in letting Monique know it.) Then Anna spilled the dregs of Monique's daiquiri as she was retrieving her glass, and although it was mainly ice, a dribble of the coral nectar spilt onto her jewelled sandal. Mildred became most animated, and anticipating distress on her mistress's behalf, barged past Anna in search of a cloth. Just as she did the twins, still in their nautical outfits and splashing in the shallow end of the pool, began fighting over a dolphin floaty. Not too concerned about her sandals, which by the time Mildred returned with the cloth she'd kicked off, Monique was intent on bemoaning the delay in Miami.

‘Well we’re here now!’ said John, tickling the twins as they wriggled from his grasp. ‘Again! Again!’ they chimed, giggling and circling his deckchair.

‘For quite a price no?’ persisted Monique, annoyed she had to raise her voice to be heard over the children. Then when John turned to chat with Anna, who he’d insisted sit with them, to ask if there was any chilled champagne, Monique sighed. John continued to placate her,

‘Darling, a bit more than usual yes, unscheduled flights are expensive. Does it really matter?’ Monique groaned and rolled over, and when Anna returned with the champagne he asked,

‘Did Dwayne bring you across from Antigua?’

‘You know him?’

‘Everyone does. Quite a character, and not a bad pilot.’

Mildred shuffled the twins upstairs to change into their swimwear. Anna was about to say something about Dwayne but realised Monique was appraising her – or more precisely – the couple of unwanted pounds around her midriff (Anna’s shirt was loose but the buttons still gaped). Realising his wife was too cross to be any fun at all, John went to fetch one of her Debussy tapes, while Anna, increasingly self conscious, listened to Monique.

### *Bette Davis Eyes*

‘Now, I am having a strict regime for this *vacance*. Just one thousand calories per day! *Comprendre?*’

Anna made a few suggestions but Monique cut her off. Apart from her daiquiris, Monique would be restricting herself to French champagne and seafood. Perhaps I’ll join her, Anna thought, picturing returning to London svelte for spring. Her new, sort of, boyfriend, and his associates were all fashionably thin. She listened distractedly, assuring Monique it would be *très facile!* Monique’s grimace was such that Anna never attempted to speak French to her again.



*'Pas creme, pas buerre, pas fromage, pas baguette!'* she continued. Anna, realising the subject was not closed and struggling for a variation on the theme, asked Monique if she liked Thai and Vietnamese food. Then, just as she was beginning to wonder what John saw in her, he appeared in knee length, floral board shorts, and began enthusing about her prawn curry. Monique, already seemingly transported by her music, flicked through French Vogue and as John was pouring the champagne, resumed her dietary litany.

*'In the morning at eight, I will take one whole-wheat toast, for the lunch I will have one salad and for the dinner I will have one salad again. It will be a different one for sure, un poisson, un petit poulet! Bien? And for the children: fresh food, not pomme frites. D'accord!'*

*'Oh!'* John groaned, pulling his lounge closer to hers. Monique drained her glass as she concentrated on pictures of models in skimpy bikinis and as John refilled it he proclaimed, *'I'll just have my usual spice and stodge thanks!'* Then Monique grabbed his girth teasingly. The Bollinger must be kicking in, thought Anna, sliding her deckchair further from the couple.

Shortly after, Mildred appeared with the twins and took up position at the shallow end of the pool, declining John's offer of champagne and shooting a prim glance, at what she didn't know, was Anna's second.

The kitchen, though open planned was far enough away from the pool and 'casual' living areas to afford a modicum of privacy. She turned on the radio and stared through the huge slatted windows. It was just after six, the sun hung low in the pink sky. Anna rifled through the spice rack and decided to make paella. She was sautéing prawns for Monique's salad, and sampling a small glass of Marsanne (for the marinade) when Mildred popped her head in. She had changed into a lemon playsuit, and when Anna, just to make conversation, asked her where she was from she replied tartly, *'London!'*

*'Oh I know! Whereabouts?'*

‘Totteridge! *You* wouldn’t know it! You’re Australian aren’t you?’

‘Isn’t that the end of the Northern Line?’

‘No! High Barnet is!’

Then when Anna asked if she was hungry Mildred brushed past, sniffed the prawn stock and shouted over ‘Bette Davis Eyes’ that she would *not* be eating *that*. After being able to barely get a word out of her earlier, Anna was shocked at how vocal she’d become. ‘Beans and eggs then?’ Anna suggested, holding up a can of Heinz English Recipe, she’d found in the back of the pantry. When Mildred snapped ‘Okay, but not poached!’ Anna surmised, that given her lack of much else, her toddler skills had to be impeccable.

### *You’re So Vain*

The first week passed unremarkably. The weather was perfect, Anna had more-or-less gotten the hang of the place; she’d stocked up the pantry, made friends at the fish and vegetable markets, and was enjoying being able to slip out courtesy of the Moke whenever she felt like it. She was relaxing in her hammock when John appeared.

‘Looks like you’ve settled in!’ He sounded oddly formal, thought Anna feeling a little dishevelled.

‘Hello, will you be having lunch in today!’

‘No, didn’t Monique tell you? We’re going sailing. I just wanted to stop by, see if there’s anything you need...’

‘No... thankyou!’

‘Everything okay with Monique and her er, diet? She’s not renown for being the easiest...’

‘Oh it’s quite okay, I’m treating it as a challenge!’ John looked amused and Anna thought she should clarify. ‘Working out the calories, I mean.’

‘Oh dear – that’s a bore! Well don’t forget to get out a bit – there’s some good bars in town.’

‘Thanks! And how many are coming to dinner on Friday?’

‘Oh, ask Monique, it’s more her crowd, about ten I think; there’s a French couple, an American estate agent, some minor dignitaries... and let me know when you need more cash’.

Comfortable driving now, Anna flicked through the radio stations. More Live Aid! She flicked over to cassette. On came some obscure reggae – a strong, raw voice – and with great rhythm, perhaps some of the new talent!

The supermarket was full of tourists. Anna walked up and down the aisles, filling up the trolley, remembering to get Mildred’s crisps and sweets, as well as a few little luxuries for herself. By the time she’d combed all the aisles she’d gleaned that the few locals that shopped there weren’t buying much – save for small packets of butter and cartons of milk, which were both luxury items, judging by the care being taken with their wrapping. The Riteway seemed to cater mainly to the British and American ‘yachties’, all of who were similarly attired in crisp, white T-shirts and faded denim.

Approaching the checkout Anna noticed a scruffy if good-looking young man in a paint-stained shirt that fitted into neither category. As she waited to pay, she watched, amused, as he flirted with the pretty girl at the checkout. Gesticulating, possibly boasting about the size of a fish, he knocked over a pyramid of tinned beef. The girl laughed, then, picking up the toppled cans, eyed him provocatively as he helped her re-stack it.

He was loitering, feigning interest in the Moke when Anna reached the car park, and in what sounded like a Dutch or German accent introduced himself as André. After comparing notes on what they were doing on the island, he invited her to Stagger Lee’s, to see a band that evening. When she refrained, explaining that she had to cook dinner, he suggested she come afterwards – Rusty Nails would be on till at least eleven.

‘No, not tonight, I have a few things to do!’

‘Such as?’

‘Er...some correspondence – and I need to wash my hair!’

‘But I love dirty hair!’

Not funny she thought, noticing how green his eyes were. He had all the hallmarks of a model: the chiselled features, the svelte, rangy body as well as a teasing, slightly vacuous smile. Perhaps not the brightest... but he could at least be an amusement. She gave him her extension number at the Palmer’s and agreed to meet for a drink later in the week.

‘So till Friday! Unless of course, you feel like visiting me sooner, in which case you can always find me at the marina. I’m on the Key Largo; it’s red and white and moored next to the marine shop.’

Anna drove on to the markets. André’s ‘you’re so vain’ gaze had unsettled her. She thought of Eva and her rogues. *He* could definitely be one, but he’d at least be a respite from Mildred and the family! Thanks to Kit, and she supposed her wad of dollars the stallholders treated her like a long lost friend. When she declined a side of goat, they were happy to pluck two of their finest chickens and a duck while a young boy gutted and scaled two kingfish. When he wrapped them and she said he could keep the seven dollars change and he looked ecstatic. She smiled, realising that that was more than she was earning an hour.

There was nobody home when Anna returned to Haute Vue and she felt like a teenager, revelling in an unexpected solitude. Quickly she unpacked the shopping, anticipating a couple of lazy hours by the pool. Then Kit sauntered in.

‘Nice! Wish I’d caught that!’

‘Oh I thought no-one was home!’ Anna covered the fish and put it in the fridge, hoping her disappointment wasn’t too apparent.

‘I won’t get in your way. They’ve taken the speedboat out, won’t be back till late. Let’s have a beer!’

He opened two Becks, passed her one, and after helping her unload the rest of the shopping, took the cassette out of his Walkman and inserted it in the ‘Bang and Olufsen’. ‘Haute Vue’ was so much more fun without the family, Anna thought, as she tipped the dregs

of her beer into a pot plant, and stretched out on Monique's deckchair, listening to 'Racing in the Street'. The Boss had never sounded so good.

### *Waiting On A Friend*

The next day was Mildred's day off and it had been more than a week since John had suggested Anna might invite her on a trip downtown occasionally, (Mildred couldn't drive). While serving her and the twins their usual bacon, eggs and fried bread, Anna proposed that Mildred accompany her to the Saturday market, which was apparently twice the size of the regular market, and was rumoured to have a decent bookstall. Just as she was insisting she couldn't possibly leave the twins, Monique sauntered downstairs looking more relaxed than Anna had seen her so far, 'Go Mildred, have some fun, buy something pretty!' She gave Mildred some folded notes, and though a little railroaded, Mildred acquiesced, then, after taking ages to get ready, trudged behind Anna to the Moke.

'Have you seen much of the island?' Anna's pleasant tone rang false as she pumped the accelerator. Mildred feigned alarm, pretending she'd been thrown out of her seat when Anna stalled the Moke. 'Are you sure you can drive?'

'It's been a while, but yes Mildred – I can drive.'

'And yes *Anna* I have seen all of the island!'

'So where would you like to go?'

'Nowhere!'

'Come on I'm supposed to show you a good time!' Anna joked.

'Says who?'

'Nobody! Want to go to Smuggler's Cove? It's meant to really beautiful and has live music!'

'No, it's too hot and there's snakes there – which might be okay for you...'

'So have you been to any of the bars?'

‘Yes, they all play reggae!’

‘Kit likes Reggae!’

‘So what!’ she said, turning crimson.

‘Want to go out one night; have a few drinks?’

‘No thanks!’

Anna shrugged, and stared straight ahead.

Mildred, with her arms folded across her ample bosom, remained terse until they neared the supermarket.

‘Here’s the Riteway. Pull over!’

After stocking up on more treats and piling them onto the back seat, Mildred reluctantly accompanied Anna around town. At the bookstall Anna picked up a collection of Somerset Maugham short stories, an old Agatha Christie mystery and some postcards, before suggesting an early lunch at the Jamaica Post, which Mildred declared was ‘too spicy’. They agreed on fish and chips at the marina, and, while Mildred was bemoaning the lack of vinegar, Anna tried to spot the ‘Key Largo’.

‘What are you staring at?’

Anna snapped ‘Nothing, let’s go to the beach!’

‘I’d rather go back. It’s getting so hot!’

‘Come on, we’re here now. Let’s at least have a swim!’

‘But we have a pool at home!’

‘Come on Mildred, we’ll go home soon. I want to swim at the beach.’

Mildred sat under a tree killing ants, and refused to go in the water. Anna ordered Pina Coladas from the bar, but shouldn’t have bothered – Mildred’s determination not to enjoy herself was unwavering.

On the drive home Anna asked Mildred if she had a boyfriend. After she’d replied *no* and refused to elaborate, Anna reached across her for a cassette. After a few bars, Mildred became animated, ‘That’s Kit! Where did you get that?’

‘Kit?’

Mildred who had turned crimson again, was doing her best to act nonplussed. Anna's instinct was to tease her as she would a friend, but she wasn't a friend and she didn't. Mildred never talked about her life at home and it went without saying that she wasn't interested in Anna's. Only two years Anna's senior, Anna thought it bordered on distasteful, how seriously she took her role as a nanny. Anna supposed she worked for one of those reputable agencies London seemed to specialise in. Her friends would surely be the marrying kind, and flashing engagement rings at her over the next few years, if they hadn't already.

'I didn't know Kit was a muso!'

'Well you are *new* here!' Mildred was prim. Anna's momentary sympathy faded fast and she decided that from then on she would make less effort with Mildred and to a certain degree, moody, weight obsessed Monique as well. The worst that could happen would be that she would be dismissed – just like Sophia. Had she mentioned to John that she was half Italian? Her mother, furious she'd even taken her husband's surname had dropped the 'I' from Rossi when they'd separated. Anna who was only four at the time had started school as Anna Ross. She rarely saw her father – and she'd never felt very Italian.

### *Amazing Grace*

Since Anna had resolved not to try so hard with the women in the house, they were more inclined to leave her to her own devices. She continued to serve Monique her calorie-controlled meals, often setting aside an identical portion for herself, (she'd lost two kilos and Monique three but it wasn't a competition). Even Mildred became considerably more agreeable, perhaps because Anna had adhered so stringently to her culinary requirements too. She supposed they'd fallen into a groove – which wasn't hard with what they had at their disposal, so with this feeling of magnanimity in the

air Anna thought she'd hit the town. When she mentioned as much to John as she served his second helping of apple crumble he said,

'Half your luck! Try Stagger-Lee's or the Bomba-Shack, they both should have a decent band on tonight.'

Monique looking slightly piqued said, 'Darling if you're bored here you may as well go too, I can always watch *Chariots of Fire* again – I do love Jeremy Irons!'

'No, I'm not in the mood for being the oldest in the room. Have fun Anna!'

'*Bonsoir!*' Monique said without looking up.

As she left to get changed Anna noticed Mildred and Monique exchange an admonishing glance, and when she passed by the open French doors, overheard John. 'Come on Monique! Give her a break - she's young, it's a shame Sarah's not here they'd get on. And we're hardly paying her much.' He then told Mildred, who was hovering, to take the rest of the evening off, he was going to read to the twins and put them to bed.

'But they haven't had a bath!' Mildred protested.

'I don't care! Why don't you go out with Anna?'

On hearing this Anna sped to her room, even though she was fairly sure Mildred didn't want to accompany her anywhere ever again, and after quickly changed into a dress applied a smudge of eyeliner and some lipstick. The ground was damp, and by the time she reached the top of the driveway she was covered in a fine mist. The fog was dense and with the Moke's pathetic headlights and just a slither of a moon, she could barely see. She concentrated on the pits in the gravel, trying to anticipate the hairpin bends. When a car came whizzing round the first one flashing its lights – she braked reflexively – startled by the yahoos of a Landrover full of exuberant boys. She inhaled and relaxed. The air was dank and fragrant and apart from the sound of crickets and the distant crash of the shore-break, the night was eerily silent.

*He's Got Me Going*



Arriving in Roadtown she felt apprehensive and did a couple of laps of 'the strip'. The lit up area comprised three or four bars, one large hotel, a couple of guesthouses, and a few restaurants. Slowing past the marina, she spotted the Key Largo and then Stagger Lee's. Entering the bar she feigned jauntiness, glancing at the band and half recognising the old blues number they'd started into. She was perusing the drinks menu when André sidled up and suggested an 'Old Jamaica'. His familiarity was considerably favourable to the novelty she would become if left to the mercy of the three swarthy gentlemen who were propping up the bar. With glazed eyes one of them muttered something to André as he led Anna to a vacant table just to the side of the stage.

'So they let you out!' He had a bit of a swagger about him, and in his cream shirt and clean faded jeans, he'd gone to just the right amount of trouble. And his clipped accent, which she was fairly sure now was South African, was faint as if he'd been to an international school or moved around as a child. He smiled confidently, flashing straight teeth, and Anna found herself turning from his steady gaze. She wasn't used to his type, nor was the 'Old Jamaica' doing its magic – and to make matters worse she could hear an unnatural tone creeping into her voice. 'So you're South African?'

'Afraid so!'

Anna reflected on Australians' attitudes to South Africans. Most, at least disapproved of apartheid. She thought of Michelle, her ex-boyfriend's sister, who was in what she and her friends considered a rather tacky relationship with an ANC member – while Michelle did have opinions about black rights, she also braided her hair rasta style and would jump up to get 'her man' (and any his friends) a beer. She realised that for André it must be hard being a white South African. And though she doubted he espoused the politics of his country, and she'd more-or-less decided that he wasn't really her type, she couldn't dispel the feeling that she needed to impress him. He was

being attentive and charming and she had to admit she might even have overestimated his cockiness.

‘Sorry about the sanctions!’ she said, aware her joke was lousy.

He looked rather impressed. ‘You’re kidding aren’t you! Why do you think I’m here?’

‘Dunno! Perhaps you’re a pirate?’

‘With my passport I might as well be! So, how’s life at Haute Vue?’

‘It’s okay, quite low key really.’

‘So who’s there?’

‘Just the family and we staff.’

‘No stars?’

‘No! Bobby Bridle was but...’

André interrupted, ‘I know! He invited me up there!’

‘Oh – are you a fan?’

‘Not really! But I *was* interested in checking out the place.’

‘I see!’

‘Perhaps you could invite me, don’t you have one of those discreet little private villas?’

‘I do actually, complete with a Japanese bath!’

‘I would *love* a bath, that’s the thing I miss most living on a boat!’

Anna could sense André was re-assessing her, no doubt thinking her a bit more of a challenge than he might have anticipated, unless he really was just interested in hanging out at Haute Vue, which of course wasn’t out of the question. Obviously, unless they were to park the Moke quite far away and slip in quietly, his presence wouldn’t go unnoticed, and as they both were going to be on this *small* island for quite a while, Anna thought she’d like to give that a little more thought. Making an effort to impress her now, he dragged her onto the dance floor, but despite his being the indisputably most handsome man in the room he was not one of the better dancers. Anna watched an older couple glide across the floor.

‘They can move!’ She regretted her offhand comment immediately as André, attempting to rise to the occasion, began to shake his arms and head wildly. As she suggested they sit down she felt a slight power shift between them. Fancying herself on the dance-floor had always been one of her small vanities.

‘I’ll get us another drink then!’ Andre appeared unruffled.

‘No it’s my turn,’ Anna insisted and as she approached the bar one of the swarthy three attempted conversation. ‘Haven’t seen you before darlin?’ The man’s eyes were glassy and Anna managed a wan smile as he dipped his panama hat. His forties suit had seen better days but was still stylish. And then his eyes flashed. His mood had changed, and in a bitter tone, he muttered, ‘You’re miles away!’ as he turned back to face the bar. While Anna waited for the drinks, she glanced over at André. He seemed a little less sure of himself now, and his accent, or perhaps it was his voice, had grown on her – or was it was just that his looks made it easy to gloss over his lesser qualities?

When she returned with mai-tais, (having already discovered courtesy of Monique, that the local rum was delicious), the band started into ‘He’s Got Me Goin’. André was keen to dance again but Anna declined, which got André started on the Palmers again, explaining that when he’d been invited up for a nightcap, Bobby Bridle, his would-be host, had passed out on the dance floor, moments after issuing the invitation, ‘So what happened then?’

‘Some kid came and got him.’

In the end it was more André’s obsession with rock stars, than his lousy dancing, that made Anna decide to call it a night. Trying to be funny he feigned devastation, then, when she really did leave without relenting to his playful protestations, he seemed genuinely taken aback. Half promising to meet him after the weekend, she seriously wondered if it was the first time he’d been knocked back.

*Who’s That Lady?*

The next morning; Friday, the day of the dinner party, Anna burnt Monique's toast and Mildred appeared sniffing and waving her arms about as if there'd been a house-fire, whilst Monique, sporting a mauve, velour tracksuit, paced up and down the pool as she waited for Dion, her new aerobics instructor. Claudine and Eliza were bickering in French, and even though Mildred cooed and fussed, they were implacable. Claudine began torturing Mildred – she was tossing her toys into the pool, then demanding Mildred retrieve them, as the milder-mannered, Eliza looked on. Mildred seemed to expect Kit to help her entertain the twins, though he only really did if John and Monique were watching, something Mildred thus far hadn't appeared to have worked out. In this instance, since Kit was not about, Mildred had no choice but to struggle in and out of the pool fetching the strewn toys. Anna, who was doing nothing anyway, considered diving in to distract the rather unpleasant Claudine, but was enjoying the spectacle too much.

Later that afternoon, realising she'd forgotten to go over the menu for the dinner with Monique, and as she was unable to find her downstairs or via the intercom, Anna tentatively knocked on the door of their private quarters. She could hear music, opera again. 'Hello... Monique, sorry to disturb...'

*'Moment.... Entre!'* Anna pushed the door open. Monique seemed more flustered than usual and as she tightened the sash of her Japanese robe – Anna thought it strange that she would care about being discovered topless by a lowly female staff member. She hadn't been privy to this part of the house. The huge sundeck was covered in mosaicked ceramic pots, full of flowering orchids and the furniture, soft, plush and upholstered in *marimekko* was casually scattered around a small plunge pool. *'Bien, bien!'* she said casting Anna's menu notes aside, and returning to the health section of her *Elle* magazine.

*'Regard,* only seventy calories! She pointed at a picture of a slender, elegant woman sipping champagne. 'Can you get me one glass?' When Anna made to go downstairs, Monique said, *'Non! La-*

*bah?*’ Of course there was a fridge here! Anna took a bottle, of which there were three, popped the cork and poured it into one of the crystal flutes that were placed upside down on a lacquered tray. ‘*Et* can you make me one salad?’

When Anna arrived fifteen minutes later with the salad, Monique’s eyes were closed, as always it seemed when she was transported by her music. She was about to top up her champagne but as she’d hardly touched it, asked, ‘Would you like me to save the rest for this evening?’ ‘*No, no*, make a mousse or something!’ she replied, waving a hand in dismissal.

Later that afternoon, as Anna was making a hollandaise Kit burst in giggling.

‘What’s so funny?’ she said.

‘Nothing, I’ve just done the lawns. John said not to bother and then Monique demanded to know why I hadn’t done them when I *knew* they were having guests!’

Kit was rummaging in the fridge for a beer when Anna, remembering the champagne said, ‘Wait! I’ve got something better!’ After pouring a small cup into a bowl of whisked egg whites she’d set aside, she emptied the rest of the Bollinger into two highball glasses. Kit downed his in seconds, put The Boss on again and tried to get Anna to dance.

‘Turn it down. Monique’s in a foul mood today.’

‘Nope. She’s gone for a massage, won’t be back till five!’

‘I thought she was still sunbathing.’ Kit snickered as Anna continued, ‘So how is it that you always know exactly what’s going on in this house?’

‘What did you think of ‘Stagger Lee’s?’ he said, not really interested in discussing the Palmers. Anna said it was okay but didn’t elaborate. Though their conversation seemed at cross purposes, she persisted, ‘Do you go there much?’

Kit’s attention, however, was drawn to the front door where John and a new arrival, were engaged in conversation. ‘No, it’s too expensive. Nice girls though!’

‘Hey Rick!’ Kit’s face lit up when he saw Rick Thompson, the infamous expat-Aussie producer.

‘Kit – long time man!’ Rick’s voice seemed too loud for his tiny frame. And with hips snug in what couldn’t have been more than size twenty-eight inch Levi’s, and that long stringy hair, he could have passed for a younger, perhaps less drug addled, Keith Richards. He rolled a cigarette, letting the paper cling to his lips, and took a drag before exhaling luxuriously.

‘Sorry mate!’ John interrupted, ‘Not in here!’

‘Of course – I’ve been batching way too long, forgotten me etiquette!’ he said, stubbing what was left of his cigarette out on his belt buckle.

‘Grace is making up the back bungalow. You can smoke all you like there. And make sure you come to the dinner tonight.’

‘Not Monique’s motley crew is it?’

‘Shush’, John laughed. ‘I’m afraid so but Anna’s cooking and I’ve got some nice Bordeaux. Do you need a shirt?’

‘Nah mate, I picked up a few in New York – a nice lady I met at the Chelsea took me shopping, and as long as Kit here still has a few er, contacts – I’d be delighted to come to dinner!’ Then turning to Anna, he asked, ‘So, you from Sydney?’

‘Yep. And you’re from Brisbane!’

‘Yeah, but since I’ve spent half me life in London I’m also half a geezer – eh John?’

John laughed as Rick helped himself to a beer and asked Anna if his old Sydney haunt ‘The Manzil Room’ was still going, while he waited for Kit, who was helping take his guitars and luggage down to his bungalow. John grabbed a couple of Anna’s canapés on his way upstairs. Monique had insisted he join her for a shiatsu massage, courtesy of Dion’s girlfriend, Shimona.

At seven Monique appeared. Wearing a white full-length, backless dress and strappy high sandals, and with her voluminous, glossy hair fanned about her shoulders, she looked sophisticated and sexy – much more the woman Anna had envisaged. John was fiddling with the stereo, but stopped to admire her as she glided to the front door to greet Antoinette and Jean-Claude. Monique's transformation was not just physical – she was clearly 'in the mood'. Anna resolved to ask Kit for the masseuse's number, and, either the dress was slimming or Anna's meagre servings had begun to do the trick – Monique was decidedly more streamlined as she led her first guests out to casual poolside dining area. Kit was busily polishing glasses, wearing a crisp, new 'Ramones' T-shirt under his white button down when Austin, a local dignitary and his mother, Geraldine arrived. Close behind them were Daryl, a 'luxury' estate agent and his wife Doreen. Anna watched as Kit sprang into maître de mode, pouring champagne all round, (except for Doreen who was having a Pimms) before trying to amuse them all with an anecdote about a German yachty who had come adrift at Smuggler's Cove. Only Doreen was riveted as Kit mimicked Kurt, the hapless sailor's expression, as he watched the local children retrieve what remained of his floating possessions. It really was more a story for the locals, Anna thought, smiling in sympathy with Kit who rolled his eyes when he came in to get more Perrier.

The dining room, Antoinette's tittering aside, had grown silent. Anna knew that the stiffer the affair, the more reliant its 'success' was on the food. With this in mind she lined up the canapés she had previously loosely piled, piped hollandaise in tight circles around each of them, and placed tiny daubs of caviar on top. She thought Kit quite touching when he wiped a smear of mayonnaise from the front of her shirt as he whizzed past with more champagne. As she passed around the first of the *hors d'oeuvres* she heard Geraldine, the oldest and seemingly most amusing of the

guests, compliment Kit on his lovely eyes. She was no fool thought Anna; though Kit did have lovely eyes, Geraldine had managed to avoid being drawn into a protracted analysis of one of Monique's recently acquired woodblock prints, with the French couple. Monique looked slightly piqued that Geraldine was still chatting to Kit, and on her way to fetch another example of the same artist's work, threw him an irritated glance. As Kit topped up Geraldine and Antoinette's mineral waters he acknowledged her with a discreet nod and exited promptly.

While Monique was upstairs Letitia arrived. She'd obviously forgotten about the dinner party as she struggled through the dining room with a large delivery. Monique who'd returned with a similarly innocuous print motioned to Kit, to go and help her. The replacement monogrammed towels and linen had arrived. As Anna diced and shredded she pretended not to notice the small pile of towels and pillowcases; that Kit, or perhaps Letitia, had stashed in the bottom of the pantry.

Daryl was talking property values, with Doreen smiling on dutifully, and poor John was nodding yes and no, often at the wrong interludes. Tall and shiny-headed, Daryl had teamed a navy sports jacket with beige chinos, which he'd already spilt shrimp sauce on, and was proceeding, uninvited to blatantly assess the value of Haute Vue. John grew irritated, and with a more booming voice than he intended, said 'he'd never bloody well sell so there was no point in continuing the conversation'. Monique, who was visibly tiring of Antoinette's meandering conversation glared at John, at which John patted Daryl on the back and added 'of course if we ever did, we'd let you know'. Kit served more champagne and accompanied Anna out to the table with the crab mousse. Anna had hastily sculpted it into the shape of a fish but when she placed it on the table, one of the papaya fins had come adrift. Luckily Antoinette took the first large helping, including the offending fin and trilled, '*Exquisite, magnifique, tres magnifique!*' Monique, though slightly aghast at her



friend's effusiveness (she was demanding Anna give her the recipe) at least seemed pleased that the food was a hit.

‘Well I reduced the stock from some prawns and the head of a kingfish, added capers and herbs, and garlic of course, and then a dash of champagne...’

‘Oh yes, I can taste the champagne. *Magnifique!*

Anna escaped back to the kitchen. Kit came in with a pile of empty *hors d'oeuvres* plates mimicking Antoinette. ‘Ooh! I can taste the champagne! Is there any more?’ Anna laughed, opened another bottle, and filled their glasses to the top. Kit skolloed his and as he picked the crispy bits off the scalloped potatoes Anna was arranging asked, ‘Have you seen Rick? I nearly forgot, John asked to go and find him.’

‘Not since lunchtime! Can you taste this?’

‘Ooh *magnifique!*’

‘Ha! Enough salt?’

‘Yeah, save me some. I’m starving! I’d better go. Oh, can you keep an eye on their drinks? That French one needs another Pimms.’

When Kit arrived at Rick’s he found him lying in his hammock wearing just a Beck’s towel.

‘You’re missing a cracking party Rick!’ said Kit offering him a joint, even though he looked like he’d just woken up.

When Rick waltzed in fifteen minutes later, John, and even Monique looked at him appreciatively. He was wearing his ‘new’ shirt, unironed, and open to the third button, showing off a zodiac pendant. (So he was a Leo.) His hair looked even stringier combed back, and even from the kitchen he smelt of Brut and dope. After some quick introductions John got up under the pretence of asking him to look at one of the speakers, from where he ushered Rick back to the kitchen, where Kit, paranoid because Anna had said he looked stoned was inserting eye-drops in the walk-in pantry. John and Rick were both laughing at Kit’s look of strained concentration, Rick

explaining to Anna in an aside, that Kit could clearly hear, that he was short sighted but too vain to wear glasses.

‘Nice threads man, thanks for making an effort! This should be good!’ John said, pulling out a couple of bottles of red. Re-entering the dining room with Rick and the 1966, Bordeaux John looked considerably happier.

Carrying a tumbler of bourbon, Rick did a pleasant little mock bow for Monique, and confided to John, ‘been out on the boat with Derek this arvo, geez he knows some people! There’s this Rasta guy, Sweet Pete, he’s pretty up himself, but his guitarist is the business! I’ve got a demo.’ Rick had scanned the group, and cleverly wedged himself on John’s right next to Geraldine, who after *accidentally* drinking Rick’s bourbon ordered one for herself. Austin who had said little so far, cautioned, ‘Do you think that’s wise mother, with your medication?’

At which Geraldine gave him an admonishing glance, before smiling at Rick who said, ‘So what are you on?’

‘Whatever it is they give people my age – not that I take it – but don’t tell Austy!’ Rick smiled settling into a three-way conversation with Geraldine and John, which left Monique, whose earlier good humour had all but evaporated, to entertain the others. She shot a glance at John who after responding with a ‘they’re your friends’ shrug, thought better of it and moved across to sit between Jean-Claude and Antionette – the dullest part of the table. He remembered that Jean-Claude worked in banking and that his wife was a ‘decorator’ and as for Doreen, and her Daryl, he had no idea why Monique had invited them.

By the time John had fetched a couple more bottles of Bordeaux, (’74 this time and Daryl was skolling it), he watched amused as (good old) Rick flirted with Monique, and though she thought him a ‘rough diamond’ she was obviously not immune to his attentions. When she returned from sashaying over to the record player and Rick whispered that he’d never seen a more beautiful woman she shrugged, and considering her girlish smile, it seemed

Rick had managed to erase her rancour with John. Edith Piaf seemed an odd choice so early in the evening, thought Anna, but with the scented Roman candles, it did somehow soften the still, stilted ambience.

After the dinner had been cleared away Rick put on 'It Started With a Kiss', insisting Monique join him on the dance floor. Geraldine, on her third bourbon, dragged John up as the others watched, somewhat bemused, quaffing the rest of the wine, except for Doreen who only ever had two Pimms. The four danced a while longer, John looking suitably relieved when Anna appeared with the pavlova and a cheese plate, which elicited oohs and ahs from Antoinette and Doreen.

Rick played 'Emotional Rescue' and 'Start Me Up' in quick succession but that was to be it for the dance floor. Daryl, ignoring his wife's pleading expression, managed to corner his host again, boring him with the latest developments in Virgin Islands real estate to the point that John nodded off. Monique, who was discussing wallpaper with Antoinette at the time, broke off her conversation to ask Anna, who still had her hands full with the dessert plates to wake him up. Monique becoming quite flustered, when Anna couldn't, demanded to know where Kit was. Meanwhile John had begun a steady peaceful snore, his nose inches from his wedge of Stilton. On his way back from changing the record again, (he thought *Hot August Night*, might suit the company) Rick was able to rouse John with one great slap on the back, and though it was clear he'd startled him, John managed a theatrical yawn before grinning at his guests, who, except for Geraldine, tittered politely. Austin, who'd barely, said a word all evening, called his driver. Geraldine had begun waxing lyrical about the 'bloody English' at which the French couple rallied at what they saw was a favourable turn in the conversation – taking a sudden shine to the elderly lady they'd passed over for most of the evening and accepting Austin's offer of a lift home in the white Mercedes.

Anna and Kit went back to Rick's for a nightcap, where Rick cranked up his ghetto blaster. Kit, who by now had a bit of a shine on began jumping about with an unplugged bass. Rick, who joked that he'd never been to such a great party in all his life, rolled a couple of joints and asked Kit if he'd heard of Sweet Pete. Kit said he had, exchanging the bass for one of Rick's acoustic guitars. Anna recognised the melody from her adventure with Mildred. Kit wasn't half bad, especially in his new denim jacket (no doubt courtesy of Rick). Anna had a few puffs on the joint and picked up the other guitar. She was tentative at first, but when Rick and Kit reminded her of a few basic chords she managed a fair version of 'Knocking On Heavens Door', which morphed into 'Comes a Time'. After two songs and sick of trying she passed the guitar to Rick who played a blistering rendition of 'Don't Think Twice', after which she left them to it.

### *Sunday Morning Coming Down*

She had been on the island for almost a month now. With Kit and to a certain extent Rick, she had fallen into an easy rhythm, especially when the Palmers were out. Not so with Mildred and that brat, Claudine who had Mildred and to an extent her mother and John, wrapped round her little finger. Anna hadn't been able to resist pulling a face at her one day when she was bullying her sister and she felt sure that not only had Claudine not forgotten, but that the child was plotting, no doubt in cahoots with Mildred, her demise.

Anna looked forward to Kit's updates about the family's activities, especially the outgoing ones, most of which she noted; John attended reluctantly. She and Kit were particularly thrilled with Monique's new found interest in sailing, which of course entailed long absences from the house, with her instructor, Bjorn.

It was on one such morning, (the Palmers had been invited to lunch at yet another exclusive yacht club) with the day stretching out

idly before her, that Anna decided to write a letter to her friend, Vincent, who was rumoured to be living in Istanbul.

Dear Vincent,  
November, 1985

25<sup>th</sup>,

*Hello, how are you?* (Corny I know, but Lionel and Live Aid are on high rotation here) also, hanging out with these record people is starting to get to me. No celeb's though, and rumour has it there won't be, at least not while the wife's in tow. Of course the island is idyllic, as you'd expect: swimming pools, rock stars. The wife is French and dull, the boss, a nice Northerner with 'a past', (though under the thumb). The nanny's a real London, slapper; white pumps, short skirts, pasty and horrible – she's so bad she's good. Then there's Kit, a local young stoner who quietly runs things with his mum and aunt, and that's about the whole motley crew. Oh except the kids, who're brats!

Love to know how life is in exotic Istanbul. Hope you're still there, I'm planning on visiting when I get back. You'd love the bars here, a bit like the White Horse in Brixton, except they free pour *and* have half decent music. Have made 'sort of' friends with a handsome, South African who's rather up himself. He fixes boats and lives on one that sounds like it should belong to Marlon Brando. Anyway it's all really glamorous but I'm starting to miss London. Have a posh 'bungalow' and a neighbour, Rick, who's a producer from Brissy. He's pretty haggard, but fun. Have you heard from Therese? She's supposed to be coming to London soon, which could work out well – she could have your old room? I'm sending this to Poste Restante so I'm not writing anymore in case you don't bother checking your mail.

*Miss you,*  
(the Brissy guy's a Stone's fanatic who looks like  
Keef)

Love Anna

Anna also wrote a postcard to her mother and one to Eva, c/o Poste Restante, Barbados, thanking her for the swimsuit and joking that so far she'd only met one rogue. She was appraising herself in the bathroom mirror when Kit appeared.

'Mildred's not going with them today – wants you to make her and the girls a late breakfast.'

'Damn!'

Apparently Mildred had begun to complain of seasickness on even the most tranquil of waters, which Anna realised suited Monique, who seemed to be tiring of having the twins in tow. And judging by the way Mildred had settled in at the shallow end, it seemed that she, Kit and Rick were to relinquish their unmonitored

poolside afternoons. After serving up the usual, bacon eggs and fried bread, none of which the twins ate, Anna cleared up, thinking she'd try out Eva's Bomba Shack for lunch. At the post office she ran into André, who though he hadn't called, pretended he was devastated that she hadn't visited him yet, and invited her for a drink that evening.

'Perhaps... I'll have to see what's happening at Haute Vue, but I could drop in on my way back from the beach.'

'I'll be waiting!' he said.

As Anna drove, confidently now, to Smuggler's Cove, she began ruminating about life on the island. In just over a month, though it had all become pleasantly familiar, it still didn't feel claustrophobic, (she *had* told Vincent she missed London, but that was more Sean and her friends, and the feeling really was fleeting). She pulled off the main road and drove down a narrow lane where mainly unoccupied, plantation style villas, were secluded amongst sprawling gardens that rambled down to the beach below. She parked in the shade and was deciding which track to take when a well-dressed woman approached, '*Bonjour Puis je-vous aider!*' Anna smiled, half wondering if she could be Eva's Marguerite.

'*Bonjour, no ce va!*' replied Anna.

'Anglais?'

'No! Australian.'

'*Vacance?*'

'*Oui! Est ce Bomba Shack?*' Anna asked, pointing at a wooden building further down the beach.

'Yes but go that way, it's easier,' she said, getting into a red Citroen.

Finding a shady spot, and pleased that there were few people about, she spread out her sarong, and pulled out *Evil Under the Sun*. After two hours of reading, dozing and swimming, to the intermittent twang of a distant ukulele and the lull of the shorebreak, the Bomba Shack cranked up their sound system, just as cooking smells began to waft across from its makeshift kitchen. When a waiter approached

and she ordered a daiquiri, she realised how accustomed she'd become to Monique's 'elevenes'.

Halfway through the cocktail she decided to move to one of the tables on the bougainvillea festooned verandah. The place had a reputation; she would ask what they recommended.

'Top up?' The waiter asked, tipping the remains of a cocktail shaker into her glass.

Anna ordered the prawns and when the waiter placed them in front of her he said, 'So – you're the Palmer's cook, eh?'

'How did you know?'

'Is a small island!'

Anna strolled back to the beach, and under the dappled light of the Moreton Bay Fig, fell asleep. Unsure if she was dreaming, she thought she could hear 'That's My Number'. When she opened her eyes puffs of scattered cloud were reflecting in the glassy ocean. For the first time, London had slipped into the recent past, and she felt so enamoured with the island she could almost begin to contemplate a life here... but it was just a thought, and a daiquiri addled one at that.

### *Always Crashing In the Same Car*

When Anna returned to the Palmers' and asked John what he'd like for dinner, he appeared crestfallen; Monique had forgotten to tell him, and indeed Anna, that they were going to Antoinette and Jean-Claude's. So it would just be Mildred and the twins again. Yelling over the blaring television Mildred agreed that they'd have last night's shepherd's pie. Anna shoved it in the oven and after serving it, grabbed the keys to the Moke and slipped out before Mildred could ask what she was up to. Anna had decided to visit André: "just next to the marina" – it was the biggest yacht there!

André, who'd been varnishing an emerald green yacht moored adjacent to it, was just finishing up for the day.

'Pretty fancy!' said Anna. The paint shone like nail polish in the afternoon glare.

‘This is nothing, come!’ He wiped his hands on an old T-shirt and passed Anna a cold beer. The Key Largo was red and white on the inside too, and the ‘living room’ and kitchen reminiscent of a New York diner or some fifties nightclub.

‘And you have it all to yourself?’

‘Yeah, gets a bit boring, want to sail away to South America with me?’

Anna laughed, wondering to what degree he was kidding. What *did* these people do?

‘I know this might sound stupid but I didn’t realise boats actually had separate rooms – it’s bigger than some of the houses I’ve lived in.’

‘Want to see the bedroom?’

‘Okay.’ The bedroom was upholstered in white leather, had red silk curtains and pillows, as well as huge gold lava lamps that dwarfed the marble bedside tables, with a walnut desk, the only fixture that hinted at masculinity.

‘So what do you think?’

‘It’s really something!’

‘Try out the bed – its from Sweden, cost a bomb.’

André took Anna’s hand and pulled her down onto it. Catching her off guard, she knocked over one of the lamps. When she heard it crack and looked concerned, André laughed.

‘What?’ She really didn’t understand his nonchalance.

‘Your face!’ Don’t worry, it’s insured to the hilt. I don’t think Terence has even seen it since the re-fit. I’m pretty sure it had Japanese lanterns and Shoji screens last time he was on board.’

Anna laughed though she wasn’t quite sure at what. She wondered if he was still a bit high from the marine paint his clothing reeked of. He was just so damn casual she thought contemplating her wage of sixty-five pounds a week. As André began stroking her back, she felt awkward, but why should she? Weren’t they both ring-ins? Unless it *was* his boat! She tried to get the measure of him but his foreignness prevented it – he smiled a winner’s smile, his tigerish



eyes glinting in the lamplight as he reached across to the drawer of the bedside table. As he rolled a joint on a red, satin bound Bible Anna asked, 'So this Terence guy, is he religious?'

Not really interested in talking, he pulled her closer, blowing smoke rings as he passed her the joint. Instead of it relaxing her, it re-enforced the feeling of not quite connecting, that she'd experienced in her interactions with André thus far. She loved the *idea* of him. *So* good looking, the improbable scenario, the attention (a little) but most of all, the something to talk about later!

'You think I'm dumb don't you?' he said, just as she'd almost convinced herself that he wasn't.

'Let's go to the Bomba Shack! The waiter said it'd be a good night there tonight.' Anna thought of Sean who was much more of a challenge. His cockiness was of a different ilk. Though he and his friends aspired to their lack of respect at the hands of the English – it was quite clear that in their eyes their 'otherness' rendered them superior. Their comments about her 'Australianness' though affectionately framed, often left her feeling on a less than even keel. With André, though she couldn't quite engage.

'We can go later!' he said, clearly not used to being fobbed off. Anna noticed his chiselled features harden, perfect so easily morphing to cruel, then as he quickly intuited her reaction, his face softened, and once more he appeared affable and full of promise.

'Okay, let's go!' he said, smiling, and slipping on a clean denim shirt.

The mood in the car, with a little effort from both of them was more upbeat, Anna describing how pleasant it had been reading and drifting off as she listened to the Bomba Shack's bands' not so extensive songlist. When they arrived André seemed on familiar terms with everyone but as soon as dinner was over he became fidgety, suggesting they move on to 'Stagger Lee's' where another band, one he insisted had a an extensive repertoire, were playing. Anna thought him a little rude, she was rather enjoying the

ambience, but when the band started into 'Redemption Song' (it would be her third time that day), she acquiesced.

Not long after arriving at 'Staggers Lee's', Anna was startled to see John Palmer, who was supposed to be at Antoinette's, swaying as he leant in to Derek. Looking much more rheumy-eyed than usual, he was grinning vacantly. So this was why Monique didn't like him drinking. André, at first thinking him an interloper – became obsequious when she introduced him as John Palmer.

'She's wonnerful, wonnerful,' John slurred, in turn introducing Anna to Rick's friend, the very dreadlocked, Derek, who though he still retained his slightly upper class Sussex accent, was totally 'rasta'. With unusually long arms and a friendly, glazed expression he assumed a bashful demeanour while John effused about his drumming.

'Anna you gotta come out on the boat tomorrow, we're gonna have a wonnerful time, hey Derek, what're you drinking now?'

'What happened to Antionette's dinner?' asked Anna.

'She had a migraine.'

When a bartender walked past John demanded he bring more of whatever André and Anna were having, even though Anna insisted they'd had enough, and in his garrulous mood, suggested André could join them tomorrow too. A little too excited for Anna's taste, André offered to help sail.

'No we gotta crew, you're gonna love Betty's Anna.' When the band cranked up and John and Derek staggered onto the dance floor, Anna noticed André quietly appraising them. She shrugged, joking that in her experience, when drunk it was easier to dance than do much else. André raised a quizzical eyebrow. Anna was unsure why he was so interested in the Palmers, especially since he already worked on the flashiest boat in the harbour.

'Betty's is the hottest little place you know. Takes two hours to sail there'

'You've never been?'

‘You kidding! It’s a private island, owned by some L.A. dude, strictly A-List!’

‘So you’re coming then?’

‘Yeah, John invited me!’

‘I’ve never seen *John* like this!’ said Anna, who after six months still felt too familiar calling her boss by his first name.

‘He’ll remember he invited me won’t he?’ André sounded whiney.

‘I don’t know! Now I’m getting a headache. I’m going to go home.’

‘Let’s just stay and see what happens – looks like he’ll buy us drinks all night!’

Anna was uncomfortable but he kept pushing. John was her boss, she was driving his car, she was already quite drunk and besides, weren’t free drinks something they both helped themselves to routinely?’

‘I’m going!’ Anna sounded gruffer than she intended and on her way out waved to John and Derek who by now were dancing with a couple of Stevie Nicks look-alikes. André followed her pleading her to stay a little longer and when she didn’t, asked if she’d drop him at the marina.

‘Isn’t it just as quick to walk?’ she snapped.

‘But I’m afraid!’ He managed to make her smile, just. The marina was about five minutes away. The damp air was invigorating after the hot, smoky bar, and the sound of jangling boats preferable to the second tedious blues band. Anna’s mood improved enough for her to agree to a nightcap on the Key Largo.

André took her hand. He was sick of trying, yet unable to quite believe he hadn’t even come close to seducing her. Intelligent women, particularly when they were getting their own way irritated him. He knew he could never say it but there it was. She asked to use the bathroom and he led her through the main bedroom, past the red marble shower. When she laughed he thought for a moment she was

laughing at him, then blurrily remembered his line about wanting a decent shower.

‘What?’ He feigned coyness; all he wanted was to have her, right now, against the wall. He didn’t like being teased.

‘The shower...’

‘Yeah, but the pressure’s terrible!’

Anna half smiled, resigned. The joke wasn’t funny the first time. He could be ‘an adventure’, perhaps enough to fill an aerogram? Sensing her slight change of tack he decided to kiss her. Anna was surprised how pleasant his lips, though slippery from the rum, felt. She relaxed a bit more, the pressure of his hands on her lower back felt good. She and Sean were hardly an item. He pulled her toward him gently. She was trying to keep an open mind – it had been a while. Sick of her tentativeness, he pushed her against the wall. Anna felt alarmed, was he just being passionate? His perfectly shaped, lips suddenly felt spongy and engulfing. She was teasing him, pulling back! This again! When she tried to withdraw he pushed his taut body into hers; he was sick of trying to win her over. All this talk of consent! She was spoiling things, toying with him. It was clear she’d been around!

Was he really not registering her reticence! Surely sexual politics in Johannesburg weren’t that different from Sydney, and wasn’t he too handsome to ever have to beg or coerce? Instead of panicking she tried to rationalise; to be fair, hers may have seemed a subtle shift; and it was always a bit of a game, one he was obviously used to winning.

‘Don’t!’ she said firmly.

‘What? Why not? I like you!’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘But I do!’ After taking a small vial from the top drawer of the vanity he pulled her towards him again. Though they were downstairs it was still draughty, and he seemed unconcerned that so much of the powder, (she assumed it was coke) was blowing away. Again, Anna wondered about André and his boss – they were, after

all, on a significant trade route. After declining his insistent offer, and leaving him to snort two thick lines off the maroon toilet seat, she understood now that his intensity might not all be down to character.

He grabbed her hand again, his eyes shiny and distant, and tried to drag her back to the bedroom. Why not! She gave him the worst of looks. He, who had been the best-looking boy in his high school – everybody thought so! Perhaps she was a lesbian. He'd noticed that her legs needed shaving.

‘Goodnight André! I might see you round!’

See me round! I'll be on that boat to Betty's *tomorrow* he thought, but said, ‘Yeah whatever!’

### *I Go To Sleep*

In a contemplative mood, Anna drove back to the Palmers. She had finally seen John drunk, upset a handsome, obnoxious man, and despite having had numerous drinks, felt completely sober.

As she pulled into the driveway she thought she heard an animal groan, then as she passed by the kitchen heard someone call her name.

The voice came from behind the hibiscus, ‘Anna can you help me?’ Anna walked towards it. ‘Sorry, I'm a bit of a mess; need to go to Rick's... can't let Monique see...’

‘Of course! Anna managed to help John, who must have been at least sixteen stone, up.

‘Isn't that your bedroom light though?’ she said, glancing back at the house.

‘That's the security light...oh I think I've broken me bloody ankle.’ It took a while to hobble to Rick's, which was by now also a makeshift studio, John explaining on the way that Rick and some girl had dropped him at the top of the driveway so he didn't wake Monique. Eventually, after moving two guitars and an amplifier, and clearing clothes and damp towels he was able to lie down on the bed.

Anna piled some pillows at the bottom of it so he could raise his leg, removed several full ashtrays from the side-tables, and got him a large glass of water. When she got back to her place, she noticed an upstairs light: definitely not a security light, go out.

The next morning when Monique came in to make 'elevenses' at ten thirty, she asked Anna, who was feigning furious concentration as she cleaned the vegetable crispers, if she'd seen John yet. Anna paused and placing the limp vegetables on the kitchen bench, felt Monique's face darken. When she slammed a strawberry daiquiri in front of her Anna winced, unsure whether it would seem impudent to mop up the slopped liquid. Not that Monique looked like she cared. She had already taken her own daiquiri as well as the remains of the jug out to the pool.

Dehydrated and unsure what was going on; Anna lingered in the kitchen realising that with this one lie she'd pledged her allegiance. This was her first live-in position and though she had her own quarters, her behaviour was always subjected to an element of scrutiny. And now she was also being asked to account for John. It was six weeks until she returned to London and now, for the first time it seemed too long.

John breezed in, or attempted to. He was wearing his striped board shorts, the ones that Monique liked. Spotting the remnants of the strawberries, he helped himself to coffee, and mumbled, 'Em – how is she this morning?'

Anna had never seen him so sheepish. 'She's by the pool. I think she knows.'

'Thanks.' Resigned, he limped across to where Monique sat. Anna watching from the kitchen was surprised to see John fling off his shirt and dive into the pool – she doubted Monique would appreciate his light-hearted approach. She grimaced as he shook his greying mop. At least the twins thought it was funny, yelling 'Daddy, daddy, do it again!' Mildred looked up primly – clearly enjoying the tension. Monique, ignoring John, tried to get the twins attention, but they were, maddeningly self-contained – having just

mastered the art of catching the beach ball. Monique glared at John as he rose unsteadily, dragging his bad leg up the pools' steps, and when he tried to kiss her cheek, she turned away.

Then as he pleaded his case she whispered something to Mildred who came storming back into the kitchen.

'Monique wants a word.'

'Now?'

'Yes now!'

Anna walked out and hovered awkwardly beside Monique's deckchair. Monique didn't ask her to sit down.

'How was your night Anna?' she said, crisply closing her magazine.

'Okay, went to dinner and then a bar.' Anna tossed the ball to the twins when Monique didn't elaborate and as Monique's glass was empty Anna refilled it, then when she *still* didn't say anything Anna said,

'Can I get you something to eat?'

'No! Did you bring someone home last night Anna? I heard talking?'

John had been lying facedown on his deckchair, but realising an inquisition was underway, came to Anna's rescue.

'That was me darling, I slipped out after I brought you home, had a meeting with that Derek, it was a little late and I didn't want to wake you so I went down to Rick's! Anna and I arrived home about the same time.'

'Quite a coincidence, no!'

They argued in French about what time it was. He'd said 12.30, which was quite a stretch. Anna was confused. Was Monique implying it might be okay for her to bring someone home? It had never been stated. Surely she couldn't think there was something between she and John. She needed to talk to Kit – who, if Monique was going 'out', was probably cleaning the Mercedes.

'Monique darling, can we go upstairs for a minute?' John said, motioning to Anna that she could go, further irritating his wife.

‘No!’ said Monique, pulling her voile wrap up over her face.

‘Okay but Anna’s coming to Betty’s today, I mentioned it last week.’

Ignoring John, she addressed Anna, who was creeping back to the kitchen, ‘Then she can at least prepare something for Mildred and the twins’ lunch before she goes.’

Annoyed, Anna defrosted a quiche and threw together a bland salad, neither of which would be eaten. Meanwhile John stretched out and rolled to face his wife, caressing her shoulder tentatively. Monique turned briskly away and closing her eyes, let her magazine slip to the ground.

‘I’m going to wake up Rick,’ John said, plonking his empty coffee cup on the kitchen bench. ‘You are coming to ‘Bettys’ aren’t you Anna?’

‘I’d like to...but?’

‘Good, you’ll enjoy it, and don’t look so worried! It’s me she’s angry with!’

### *Do You Think I’m Sexy*

Of course André was there. He’d dug out some white Levi’s and one of those Mick Jagger’s lips T-shirts and was chatting to Derek as if they were old friends when she arrived with John and Rick. Once they’d boarded, a young boy served drinks and Derek, with André as his sidekick, rigged up some speakers. Meanwhile Derek’s friends, essentially Sweet Pete, his guitarist, drummer and a couple of hangers on rolled several fat joints. John, though a little pale, looked to be in his element.

Anna went to talk to André who was still fussing with an extension lead.

‘So you made it!’

‘Yeah, said I’d lend a hand!’

‘You look different.’



‘What do you mean?’ André asked, distracted by the only other female on board, a whimsical, waif-like creature with voluminous, honey coloured hair, pouty lips and fawn-like eyes who was staring, as if mesmerised, out to sea.

‘Who’s she?’ said Anna.

‘Chandra!’

‘Never heard of her!’

‘Well you will, Derek’s producing her album, reckons she’s going to be big!’

‘Wow!’

‘Yeah...’ sighed André. Anna laughed, relieved that André’s interest in her had been fleeting.

‘Betty’s’ more than lived up to its reputation. What could have been just another pretty plantation pavilion, nestled amongst lush tropical gardens overlooking the shimmering Caribbean, turned out to be a small understated, restaurant with a quirky clientele (especially for these parts) and the most sublime food she’d ever eaten. Plate after plate of local specialties were accompanied by lashings of (yes more) champagne and wine, served by unassuming staff, none of who gave the impression they were working. Anna almost choked on the crab claw she was decimating when John, draining a bottle of aged Riesling, asked, ‘So who’s the ponce in white?’

‘Dunno, looks like he’s a friend of Derek’s.’

‘Probably a roadie, there’s always a few slip through! Are you going to have dessert?’

Anna looked across at André who was by now spoon-feeding zabaglione to Chandra.

‘Perhaps... I might have what she’s having!’

‘One of those and a hummingbird please!’

‘Anna I am sorry about this morning! Monique and I, well like all couples I suppose, have our moments.’

‘Oh, I was just worried I may have said the wrong thing. I’ve loved being here – you must miss it, when you’re in London I mean.’

‘If it were up to me, we’d be here half the year, but Monique prefers Paris.’ He looked wistful, but Anna wasn’t sure if it was the island or his strained relations with wife that he was contemplating.

‘Is that Betty?’ Anna glanced across at an elegant woman who was graciously holding court at a cosy table of four.

‘No, Betty’s the man in the pale green suit, over on that far table – he bought the island years ago, used to cook everything himself, but now he just lives here and entertains his myriad of friends.’

‘I wonder if he needs anyone in the kitchen?’

‘And leave me to the mercy of those ‘Sloane Rangers’ from the agency. Anna laughed, relieved that at least her job at the studio, still sounded secure.

It was a smooth sail back. Everyone was drowsy and subdued, except for André and Chandra, who had become loud and confident. She had, apparently, grown up on a commune in Oregon, and had been a Cherokee Indian in her past life! Anna thought when Chandra had taken a while to warm to André over lunch, she might have been reserving her charms for the industry men, but in his white outfit, she realised, she probably assumed he was one. When she began espousing the virtues of macrobiotic food Anna grinned at André, who winked, before tilting his head to Chandra’s ‘heart chakra side’, as once more he listened attentively. He seemed so pleased with himself now that Anna didn’t bother mentioning the white powder that trailed from his nostrils to the top of his lip.

When they returned to Haute Vue and John and Rick slunk off to an impromptu ‘business meeting’ at Rick’s, Monique managed to corner Anna before she too was able to slip off.

‘Could I talk to you for a moment.’ This time Monique insisted she sit down.

‘How long have you been working for Crystal, Anna?’  
Monique asked crisply.

‘Including the month here?’

‘Yes. *Bien sur!*’

‘About six months, I suppose...’

‘And in this time how many times have you seen John like last night?’

‘None, I mean never, I don’t socialise with him.’

‘Then why do you take a man with a family and a big, a very big drinking problem to this ‘Stagger Jo’s?’

‘I didn’t, he was already there.’

Kit wandered into the lounge room under the pretext of doing a minor electrical repair and from behind the Bang and Olfsun raised an index finger to his lips. Not really sure quite *what* it was Kit meant she shouldn’t say, she remained as vague as possible, half wondering if John was forbidden to go to bars at all.

‘Next time, he is drunk, I want you to ring me and I will send Kit *d’accord!*’

With that Monique turned and walked upstairs. Then from halfway up she announced, ‘And I won’t be dining in tonight!’

### *This Must Be The Place*

Anna now had only two weeks left to go on the island. Monique had lost a few more kilos, Mildred had gained some, and Anna had done both. Rick and John mainly purported to be busy in the studio, and Kit flitted about doing his own thing in between quietly running the house. (Kit had also somehow managed to half ameliorate Monique, telling her, he’d been told by one of the barman at Stagger Lee’s, that a promoter from Phoney, the rival record company, had spiked John’s drink, in his vain attempt to poach Derek). Even the children seemed happy now, as they pottered from playroom to pool, with the devoted Mildred ever in tow.

Anna had grown relaxed to the point of slovenly, sleeping in so often that she now needed to set an alarm to be assured of having Monique’s whole-wheat toast on the terrace by eight. Contrary to what she’d initially thought, apart from the incident a month ago, things had panned out quite nicely with her. Monique had even

bought Anna the silk blouse she'd admired in 'Nadine's' – no doubt her reward for helping her reduce to a svelte 63. Despite this new spirit of bonhomie between them, Anna had continued to refrain from reporting on John's drinking episodes, one after a session at Derek's, and another at Stagger Lee's.

It was Friday, the day of the Palmers *fete*; which according to Kit often attracted as many as sixty guests. Rick had sweet-talked Monique into an early start Aussie barbeque, as there was a band at the Bomba Shack that he and Kit wanted to catch the end of.

It was a perfect afternoon. Monique was in town getting her hair done and Rick and Derek were fooling about as they set up the speakers by the pool. Then seemingly out of nowhere Rick said, 'Hey Anna, I saw André yesterday. Said you were mean to him?' Anna looked puzzled; she hadn't seen him since the boat trip.

'What are you talking about?'

'Oh poor André!' he teased.

'Looked like he was having an okay time with Chandra!'

Anna looked at Derek to see if he was in on the joke.

'Only because *you* broke his heart!' Derek chimed in.

'Okay what's going on? I didn't even know you were friends?'

Rick started laughing. 'Just teasing! Sounds like he's got it bad for you though.'

'What about Chandra? They looked pretty cosy.' Anna was puzzled; Rick wasn't really the teasing type.

'Cosmic Chandra's been dragging him to every one of her recording sessions and that Terence is threatening to fire him.'

Derek piped in, 'Yep! He'll be off the Key Largo if he can't get rid of her!'

'Oh poor André?'

'Anyway he wants us to hurry up and finish the album so he can ship her back to North Carolina, but we don't have any other work till Sweet Pete gets back so we're pretty keen to drag it out.'

'Oh well I guess that's showbiz!' said Anna.

Rick laughed. 'Oh and we felt sorry for him and invited him tonight!'

'Okay!'

'Well, John's even invited the crew from 'Phoney''.

Monique had rented a villa for her friends, Hélène and Maurice, who were flying in from Paris and when Kit and Anna were on their way there to stock up the kitchen, she thought she saw Eva in the passenger seat of an old green M.G. It had to be her; who else would be wearing a coral silk scarf, wrapped Hollywood style, around cream Chanel sunglasses. Anna leaned across and beeped the horn but the M.G had already sped round the next corner.

### *It Started With A Kiss*

The barby was rather stiff to begin with; a huddle of guests made small island talk and smiled politely as they nibbled the first of Anna's canapés and tittered about the view from Haute Vue. Geraldine had brought her granddaughter, Emily, who Kit was quite taken with, but apart from her and a few of Derek's friends the crowd was mainly pushing fifty. Things began to warm up when Rick played his 'Guaranteed to get the worst of em up' funk tape, then, not long after, Eva arrived with Dwayne, yes, the pilot. Anna was cooking fillet mignons, king prawns and parrot fish when she breezed in.

Surely they weren't an item?

When Letitia and Grace came to help Anna stole Eva away from Dwayne, and dragged her down to her bungalow to talk while she got changed.

'It's so good to see you – I didn't know you were thinking of coming to Tortola!'

'I wasn't! And don't look so concerned – he's not my type at all, though I do fear he's rather besotted!'

'Oh I didn't think... what *is* your type Eva?'

‘Oh I don’t know – rich and European? But even then...tell me darling! How have you been?’

‘Oh pretty good – I met *one* of your ‘rogues’!’

‘I got your card – is he coming tonight?’

‘I think so!’

‘So Dwayne?’

‘Well I met him on the plane of course. He offered to be my driver, but I fear he might have rather the wrong idea.’

When Anna and Eva returned to the house Derek insisted on dancing with them both. A group of model types, who’d been posing by the pool, were making appreciative noises at each new song until finally, some burly looking yachty types invited them to dance. Anna and Eva shared a bottle of champagne in between dancing and as she and Kit had already polished one off while serving the barbeque Anna wasn’t finding it at all hard to get into her stride.

By the time Derek and Eva were doing the bump, about when Anna realised Dwayne was standing on the sidelines, nursing his large bourbon, there would have been almost thirty people on the dance-floor. When Kit asked Emily, who was every bit as enamoured with Kit as he was with her to dance, Austin looked rather uptight and Anna chuckled as she listened to Geraldine’s scolding him, ‘For Chrissakes Austy!’ Then Rick, deciding it was a big enough audience to warrant his presence got Eva, Derek, Kit, Emily and Anna all doing ‘the bump’ in a line. Of course Rick, with his tiny hips gyrating perfectly was the best! By ten, Anna, thinking she hadn’t seen Monique on the dance-floor once yet, noticed her poised demurely on one of the rattan lounges. Rick ever the diplomat, sidled over to her, bowing and insisting she dance with him.

Unable to refuse, Monique pulled off a self-conscious shimmy.

And that was Anna’s last clear memory of the barbeque.

*It’s Got To be the Morning After*

Anna's head was pounding when she woke. She had neglected to close the blinds, which seemed odd. Sunlight streamed in and as she pulled the sheet over her head, trying to recall the events of the previous evening, she realised she was still clothed. She backtracked. The preparations and barbeque had gone smoothly. Monique had seemed in a reasonable mood, happily entertaining her Parisians, Eva's arrival with Dwayne had been a shock. Grace and Letitia had helped clear up. After serving the cheese and dessert she'd danced with Derek and Rick, after which Rick began fawning at Monique's feet...

As soon as she turned on the toaster she knew something was amiss – Monique was making 'elevenses' and made a point of issuing one to everyone except her. Mildred smiled obsequiously, even though she too had been drunk at the party, demanding to dance with Kit who was so obviously enthralled with Emily. In that instant she realised that Mildred's assailing of Kit was *after* what she'd previously construed to be the end of proceedings, when Rick had asked Monique to dance.

Anna glanced at Monique, who said, 'I'd like to talk to you later Anna, but for now can you get us some baguettes; we seem to have missed breakfast!'

Where was John? Anna wondered. Or Kit? Rick wouldn't be up. And baguettes! Monique never ate baguettes!

Mildred shot Anna a sly glance.

'Did you enjoy the party?' Monique asked sarcastically as Anna served the hastily constructed *Croque monsieur*.

'Yes, but I got the most dreadful headache. Sorry I left so early. I was so queasy I felt like I might pass out. How late did it go?'

Monique and Mildred's laughter was so shrill and so in sync it made Anna feel like a character in some wretched fairy-tale.

‘*Mais* you were already *out*.’ Monique chuckled, pleased with her pun, which was lost on the Parisians. Anna still had no idea what they were talking about.

‘And whatever happened to the Austrian woman...poor Dwayne!’

‘Monique, I’m so sorry, I really don’t rem...’

‘Not now.’

Anna left, ignoring Mildred who was motioning that she still needed to clear the plates away. She went down to Rick’s, and found Kit lying in the hammock, looking content if a little worse for wear. ‘Anna, nice moves – how’re you feeling?’

When she collapsed into Rick’s beanbag she noticed that both her knees were bruised. ‘What happened? Monique’s really pissed off. I seem to have lost a few hours – how are *you*?’

‘I’m fine, Rick’s pretty seedy though – must have been something André gave you.’

‘Really?’

‘You don’t remember him dancing with the nice German lady?’

‘Eva?’

‘Yeah, what a woman!’

‘But I didn’t even see André?’

‘You and Eva were dancing with him for ages. Seems pretty sweet on you!’

‘I don’t remember that.’

‘Geraldine said you were *far* too good for him.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, you don’t remember lying across Geraldine’s lap? She was stroking your head.’

‘Oh God!’

‘Yeah! Eva was hitting it off with Rick by then. Don’t worry Geraldine was having a great time.’

‘Oh...now I do vaguely. I think Monique’s going to sack me.’



‘John will sort it out!’ said Kit.

‘Bloody hell!’ Rick came out, wrapped in his Becks towel.

‘Feel like I’ve been hit on the head with a sledge hammer.’

‘At least you didn’t make a fool of yourself!’ said Anna.

‘Didn’t I? Don’t worry, I’ll explain to John it was André’s fault.’

‘But I didn’t even see André!’

‘You don’t remember the bet?’

‘No!’

‘In Monique’s plunge-pool?’

Anna moved to the daybed from where, through Rick’s slatted blinds she could see Eva *in flagrante delicto*, with her Lufthansa, eye-mask half covering her face.

‘Anyway I’ve gotta go, I’ve got ’er company!’

Anna and Kit exchanged a glance. Rick went back into his room and Anna went up to the house to face Monique. On the way she noticed that the Parisians’ car was leaving, just as she bumped into John on his way down to Rick’s.

‘Don’t go up there. We’ve just had a fight. She’s calling Daryl to discuss selling the house.’

‘Oh no!’

‘I’m not letting that slug *near* this place.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry about last night.’

‘Why? You were hilarious!’

‘Was I rude to anyone?’

‘No-one that mattered! Poor old Dwayne left with his tail between his legs though!’

‘What happened?’

‘Your friend Eva was hitting it off with Rick and he just lost it! Threw a drink at Rick, and was about to throw a punch, but Kit intervened and managed to get him a room in a hotel downtown.’

‘So are we staying or going back to London?’

‘I’m really not sure – I’ll pay you, either way of course. Would you prefer to go back, with the way things are?’

‘Well, I think Monique might prefer that I left...’

‘Look, it’s hard to explain but young women seem to rub her up the wrong way. She’s the same with, my daughter. Sarah loves the island, spent half her childhood here, but since I married Monique, well, she’s made herself pretty scarce. I know I’m no saint. But I never was – anyway, like I said before – it’s me she’s angry with!’

## The History of Modern Art

Vincent sat staring out of the small barred window. It was midday and he'd eaten nothing since Sabine left three days ago. He swirled the dregs of his muddy Turkish coffee and lit another cigarette, repulsed by his already yellowing fingers. His skin was sallow and papery, he still hadn't showered or shaved and his recently grown long hair was matted. In short though he was generally scornful of those who indulged in self-pity, he was making rather a decent job of it.

If only! If only he hadn't listened to bloody Nadia! More to the point, if only he hadn't slept with her! And even more to the point if only he hadn't *said* that Nadia had trapped him (which she had). That was when Sabine had lost it. She'd called him pathetic – a word he'd never even heard her use before. How natural and true it had sounded, with her Turkish/German accent. But it was hardly fair. Nadia had played him and now she was playing Sabine. She was probably in Berlin with her right now, perhaps even insinuating herself into the exhibition.

Vincent shuffled to the front door to shoo away yet another screeching cat. Obviously hungry, it tried to slide inside his front door and when he nudged it away it snarled. Vincent considered fetching the dregs of a carton of milk for it, but instead resumed his slumped position at the table. He needed to talk to someone, preferably Anna. Did he still have her work number at Crystal? She could be anywhere. Perhaps he should go back to London; at least he could get work there. But then Sabine might still change her mind, surely it was only a matter of time before she realised what Nadia was up to, especially when she saw her paintings!

Deciding he needed to pull himself together, he had a cold shower (no coins for the hot water metre), threw on jeans and a shirt and was about to descend the staircase and *finally* leave the flat when

he heard the doorbell. Hoping it was Sabine he yelled ‘wait a moment’, as he dragged a brush through his hair. But it wasn’t Sabine – it was Therese!

‘Vincent, you speak Turkish, and you’re looking very....’ Vincent hid his disappointment, not that he wasn’t pleased to see Therese.

‘Therese, bloody hell, thought you were doing public art in India.’

‘Very funny – is Anna here?’ Therese was poking her head in the door; Vincent still hadn’t invited her in.

‘No, should she be? I was just going to buy some milk. Come in, want a coffee?’

Vincent didn’t want to explain himself to Therese; in fact he probably couldn’t even face talking to Anna about it just yet, even though she would be more understanding. Therese decided to have a shower and get changed and while she did Vincent tried to pull himself together. He poured himself a shot of raki and began wiping down the benches in the kitchen. He squashed a large cockroach and kicked it under the fridge. ‘I’ll get some food and wine shall I?’ Vincent tried to sound enthusiastic.

‘Why don’t we just go out when Anna gets here?’ Therese, on her way to the shower, was explaining how she’d missed their scheduled flight, how she’d sweet talked some flight attendant into getting her on another, and that Anna’s flight should be landing about now. Vincent spied Therese’s duty free bags – a bottle of Jameson’s and a carton of, oh dear, Sobranie. Surely she hadn’t bought those for him?

Therese threw herself on the lounge. She was wearing a singlet and a pair of harem pants. She looked good – lithe and healthy. She musn’t have gotten into the drugs in India, oh and she’d gotten a tattoo. She stretched out on lounge and poured two glasses of Jameson’s. No, he didn’t have any ice. No he didn’t have any food, that’s why he was going to the shop! Therese found half a packet of figs and nuts, which she insisted were delicious. She was

in a good mood. And she'd had a lover, two...three! He relaxed into the whisky, lit one of her foul cigarettes and encouraged her to talk about India. The Afghani sounded interesting. He wanted details but she was being unusually shy, skimming the sex. He found half a joint and lit it. At least he didn't have to talk about himself.

Therese, realising she'd been commandeering the conversation began to feel a little indulgent. Vincent had barely spoken. She coaxed him, trying to get him to open up about his recent affairs but he grew taciturn. His lips quivered as he began the story, well the debacle as he put it, of his recently failed relationship. When three hours had passed and Anna didn't arrive they assumed she too, had missed her flight. Therese tried her number in London but it rang out. They decided to leave a note for her on Vincent's front door, explaining where the key was and which bar they would be in.

But when Therese and Vincent stumbled in at two, Anna still had not arrived. They were joking about what a hit Therese's harem pants had been as they collapsed onto Vincent's bed. It was too late to drag out the spare futon now. Therese stretched and flexing her leg pointed with her big toe, at a painting just to her left.

'She's beautiful! Is it her?'

'No, another friend, or I should say *ex*-friend.' Vincent was staring at Therese's leg, or body to be more exact. Through the pale green cheesecloth of her harem pants he could see, above the outline of her skimpy underpants, a tattoo.

'Show us your tat then?' Therese smiled, and she slowly removed the harem pants.

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Anna's taxi driver frowned when she wound down the window of the yellow taxi; the fetid, hot dank air reeked of diesel and old fish. Though Anna knew he was irked, she was so keen to take in this ancient and glamorous city, she couldn't be bothered

humouring him – especially since there had been several drivers fighting for her fare, all insisting they knew the way to Erkan Sokak 5. He mumbled brusquely, before screeching to a halt. Was he was trying to explain that, here, Tunel Station, was as far as he would go? At first Anna refused to get out, but when he refused to budge, she hauled her luggage off the back seat, vacated the taxi and followed the only sign she could read, to the Galata Tower.

Therese, who'd been staying with Anna in London, had thought it would be fun to pay a surprise visit to Vincent in Istanbul, and managed to procure them cheap tickets. They were to meet at Gatwick at twelve, Therese catching the train up from Brighton, where she'd been visiting her aunt, Deirdre. Their flight was at one but when Therese hadn't appeared by the final boarding call, Anna boarded the plane without her.

Anna and Vincent, both usually keen letter writers had only exchanged a couple of postcards this past year, the more recent one, months before in March, detailing what she hoped was still his current address. As he'd sounded quite happy with his cheap flat in a desirable part of town she doubted he'd have moved, particularly as he'd maintained he had few contacts in Istanbul, (he'd even, unusual for Vincent, hinted at loneliness). Anna had also expected Vincent would have returned to London by now, knowing how little money he'd left with, and that was more than a year ago. Spotting the 'Yellow Harmony' cafe a second time; realising she'd been going round in circles, Anna consulted the map again, and though she could discern Tunel and the Galata Tower, the surrounding tangle of streets and laneways remained a blur. Stumbling on cobblestone, she almost collided with a tea seller, who smiled wanly, as swinging his silver filigree, chained contraption out of her way, he barked, 'No English!' before disappearing down a side alley.

A little later two women in black hijabs bustled past, laden with shopping. Anna felt their just visible eyes slide over her wondering if it was her new pencil skirt from 'Body Map' that had

piqued their curiosity? After climbing a steep staircase, she followed a winding pathway to Sishane. This part of the city was much more residential; olive and cypress trees lined the streets, and grocers, fishmongers and bakeries were more prevalent than the touristy ‘bazaars’ and souvenir shops of Galata. And it felt cosmopolitan; the string of cafes and bars here were full of people, Turkish people, well, make that Turkish men!

She was attracted to a small shop, cluttered with lanterns, old kilms and sepia photographs. It was so dark when she walked inside she could barely see the steep, stone steps that led to a small garden area, decorated with hanging carpets. Of the three small tables, two were taken. At one, two men played dominos and at the other four men were smoking hookahs. And just as she’d set down her duffle bag and small backpack, and was about to sit at the vacant table she realised, thanks to an embarrassed young waiter, that the place was ‘men only’. After following the lane out into a small square she came to a dead end where three sullen faced boys were slouched against a graffitied wall that’s imagery – a huddle of hollow faced and scowling frenetic stick figures, seemed to echo their defensive angst. She was about to compliment them on what she assumed was their work when the rattiest of them took a long drag on his cigarette and proceeded to blow perfect smoke rings, as his sidekicks snickered in unison.

A little taken aback she left the square. Her feet were aching, it was humid, and beginning to get dark, and as there was not a taxi in sight, she decided to follow a sign to a Sufi temple. Set in a small shady park, the old stone building felt solid and peaceful, and in front of it was a vacant wooden bench where she could rest and consult her phrase book. A sleek ginger cat slunk towards her, rubbing its thin body against her legs. Anna, not a cat lover, leant down to pat it. As soon as she did another two cats sidled up, surveying her on their way to a bowl of kibble that had been placed on the temple’s steps. Tired, and wishing she’d contacted Vincent

before arriving, she watched as a skeletal dog approach. Expecting a scuffle, she was surprised to see that the cats remained unperturbed, even allowing it some of the food.

Anna found these sphinx-like versions fascinating. And it seemed that they were everywhere – in alleyways, on windowsills, even lingering, as if patrons, in the bars and cafes – all seemingly with the same offhand demeanour. When a man in a billowing beige caftan came out to refill the bowl more cats appeared and this time a scuffle did ensue – the ginger lashing out at one of the interlopers. Then when the man shooed off the first cats, Anna thought, even as they slunk away they seemed much more like honorary guests than the strays they must have been.

As she descended the staircase out of Shishane, deciding to head back to Tunel, a dense fog rolled in, redolent of the briny Bosphorus. She contemplated what the street stalls had on offer. Dinner with Vincent and Therese was what she'd anticipated but a pastry and a bottle of coke was what she settled for. She was sitting on a concrete pier dislodging a stone from inside new Monkey boots when a woman yelled from above, '*Otel! Kirilik?*'

In less than a minute the woman had Anna's two bags hurled across her narrow shoulders, and was ushering her through a narrow entrance into a building with thick concrete walls, embedded with glass-like blue ceramic eyes. At first protesting, for twenty lire a night Anna conceded to 'just looking', knowing that once inside it would be impossible to say no. Though they were both puffing as they rounded the staircase to the seventh floor, the woman, who must have been at least sixty-five, refused to let Anna relieve her of either of her bags. The arched wooden door opened into a surprisingly spacious room where three small children played. In another she could just see an elderly man in an armchair staring blankly at a Turkish soapie. The woman urged Anna down a dark hallway, '*bu yolden, bu yolden!*' Inside was a neatly made single bed, a basin, a small desk and an armchair covered with a crochet tablecloth. On the



walls were a children's painting, a prayer mat and a rather severe picture of Ataturk. As she opened the double doors that led out to a small terrace, the woman patted her chest saying, '*Ismim Anice!*'

'Anna!' Anna gestured similarly.

Then with a proud sweep of her chubby arm, Anice invited her to take in the view, '*Bukmak! Bukmak!*' From here she could see the Bosphorous, with its melange of ferries, tankers and fishing boats, and behind it the minarets of the Hagia Sophia (or was it the Blue Mosque?) soaring against a fiery orange sky. Handing Anice twenty lire, she wondered if Vincent was privy to such a view, as she tried out her pocketbook, Turkish.

'*Tash ker e...*'

'*E Diram!*' Anice completed the greeting, smiled and left. Anna lay on the bed. Should she ask for a key? The television blared and the children argued. She listened to Anice trying to appease them, surely not for her benefit? Was she their grandmother perhaps? And if it *was* a hotel, was she its only guest? Anice returned presently with a towel, pointed down the hall and said, '*Bir Banyo!*'

Anna returned to her room wrapped in a soft cotton towel. Upon the table were set a plate of stuffed peppers, a pot of tea, a mug embedded with more of the blue eyes and a key. The peppers, if oily were delicious and after downing two more cups of tea, she poured some of her duty free whisky into the cup, and still draped in the towel, strolled out onto the terrace. Another view of The Galata Tower! From this close the medieval looking, tapered structure appeared as if straight out of 'Rapunzel'. She heard a light footstep and felt something, a hand perhaps, brush her side. When she turned, slightly alarmed, she spied one of the children running back inside, and heard Anice's already familiar scolding again. When she appeared in the hallway smiling a crooked smile, Anna realised that she must have taken her false teeth out, which, with her hooked nose, stooped shoulders and slightly icy eyes rendered her decidedly witchlike. As the sun set the grey hazy horizon turned a lurid pink –

and the tiny lights that adorned the larger mosques glittered, accentuating their perfect geometry. Much more beautiful than Paris, Anna mused, with the whisky quelling her fleeting paranoia. Apart from the television and the cars that passed below she could have slipped back a century or two – and watching the lights of the cruise ships as they sailed along the Bosphorus, she was beginning to understand why Vincent had stayed here so long.

Anna was wondering if he'd been missing his friends in London, not to mention his British dole cheque, when it occurred to her that he might not even be here. Particularly as the postcard she'd received (four buxom peasant women thrashing something in what surely wasn't meant to be such a suggestive pose) had been posted from Bodrum, a coastal town in the south.

She lay down on the narrow bed, determined to finish *Midnight Express*. The barbaric nature of the Turks it portrayed seemed most at odds with her impressions of a city she'd so far perceived to be, if not particularly friendly, more liberal than she'd imagined and decidedly more glamorous; well except for the young, fierce looking guards armed with machine guns at the airport. As Vincent had been here almost a year now he'd no doubt enlighten her on all things Turkish she thought sleepily, as the book slid from her hand.

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The next morning after Anice had shown her how to get to Erkan Sokak 5, Anna decided she'd leave her luggage with her and walk across the bridge to Sultanahmet. She arrived at the Grand Bazaar just in time to watch the vendors setting up for the day, and observe businessmen in cheap suits barking at men swathed in rags, bent horizontal under loads of vegetables, grain and flour. Running amongst them were waif like children, snatching whatever meagre morsels escaped the sacks, whilst dodging a man wielding a stick. Anna flinched when he struck a small girl across the face.

As it was still just after eight and Vincent was a notoriously late riser, she stopped for a coffee at a café near his street. Having lived in London for a couple of years she was used to bad coffee, but when she sipped this tiny cup of black sludge; a peculiar mix of sickly sweet and bitter, she recoiled. A young man at a nearby table offered her a cigarette, just as another, this one much scrawnier, snarled, ‘*O sigara içmiyor!*’ from behind his English newspaper. The tone, stern and unpleasant, was at once familiar and pulling his uncharacteristically long hair, away from his eyes Vincent fixed Anna with a beatific smile.

‘Vincent –you speak Turkish! I should have guessed *you’d* find *me!*’

As they embraced Vincent said, ‘I was only telling the wanker that you don’t smoke.’

‘He looks terrified! *And* I can’t believe you’re already fluent enough to be nasty!’

‘Oh, don’t worry about him!’ Vincent slid alongside Anna. ‘I’ve missed you!’ Therese’s arrival last night had been a surprise. Anna’s was a relief – he’d easily pull himself together now. Anna was smiling a sort of vague apology at the young man as he left.

‘Forget him He really is the local sleazebag. I can’t believe you’re here!’ A waiter brought Vincent’s coffee over from his previous table and lit his cigarette.

‘So you been looking after yourself?’

‘Not particularly!’ Anna shrugged.

‘Still working for Palmer?’

‘No. His wife put on weight again and commandeered me to Paris. It was such a drag living with her, the nanny and kids again, so I left.’

‘Yeah that doesn’t sound so glamorous!’

‘No!’

‘I got your postcard, the island must have fun though?’  
mused Vincent.

‘Some of the time – I’m back at Jilly’s. And you? You look well.’

‘Bullshit Anna!’ Vincent’s fingers trembled ever so slightly as he rolled a second cigarette. ‘Bloody things!’ For a moment Anna thought he was referring to his hands.

‘Brought you a carton of Stuyvos!’

‘Great.’

‘Hardly!’

‘So – you’re here for a week?’

Puzzled, Anna said ‘How did you know?’

‘Therese told me. She’s here already. Brought me a carton of bloody Sobranie!’

‘Oh dear!’

Vincent made small talk and was going through all the right motions but seemed detached. Anna, thinking they probably just needed a little time for their old easiness to return said,

‘Can’t believe Therese missed the flight and managed to get here before me....’

‘Yeah, she managed to sweet talk some *Lufthansa* guy.’

‘Classy! I can’t believe she found your place so easily?’

‘Yep. Got waylaid by some whacky relations. So how come you didn’t tell me you were coming? I could have spruced myself up a bit.’

‘It was Therese’s idea – the surprise!’

‘Cute!’

Anna laughed. ‘I didn’t think you’d stay so long. Did you get a job?’

‘Hardly, I can’t do anything, especially not here! You’d have no trouble though; they like pretty girls that speak nice English.’

‘Gee thanks! So how are you managing? Another rich girlfriend?’ Anna could never quite understand how Vincent got by; but as he was painfully averse to being questioned, she mostly never asked.

‘Well I *had* a girlfriend, and as it happens she is quite rich, but that’s a long sad story. Even sadder is that I’m still on the dole – Peter hands it in, takes his cut, then, posts me a cheque – sometimes. Naughty I know. On the...er, positive side I do have a couple of paintings in a show in Berlin next month. Least I think I still do!’ Vincent grimaced, averse to anything that so much as hinted at bragging.

‘That’s great!’ Anna tried not to sound patronising. Relieved to be able to change the subject, Vincent drew her attention to a woman dressed in a frilled flamenco skirt with a mane of flaming red hair who, about to do a spot of busking, was tuning a small, purple ukulele.

‘Here comes Turkey’s answer to Edith Piaf!’ he enthused, Anna thinking he was definitely not himself as the woman belting out the first bars of ‘La Vie en Rose’, flashed emerald eyes at him and curtsied, before starting into the verse. He tossed her a few coins, encouraging a few others who had stopped to listen, to do the same. It could have been a routine, thought Anna; this time, at least struck by how at home he seemed. But by the time the singer had started into the second chorus, Vincent’s attention waned and Anna began to sense that his jollity was forced.

She punctuated the small silence. ‘Want anything to eat, I’m going to try a “village breakfast!”’

He grimaced, then remembering he never really ate till evening – a restraint she’d always envied, Anna shrugged. Realising how ungracious he must seem, he joked, ‘sorry I sort of drifted off for a moment – thought I was in some Pigale nightclub!’

Anna pretended to concentrate on the menu. Awkwardness had never been their forte. Vincent was decidedly out of sorts. The

Piaf woman wasn't *that* great, and his nightclub joke was way below par. After eating two eggs, and half of the cheese and olives she asked if he was sure he wasn't tempted.

'No thanks! I should have told you it actually takes a village to get through one of those! And you know I like my cheese and olives with wine.' He lit another cigarette; he had always smoked but this seemed excessive. Raising a bemused eyebrow at Vincent, as she nodded that, yes, the waiter could take the plate away, she said. 'So I'm guessing you're not in the mood for sightseeing?'

'Not really, but let's get your stuff and go to my place. Therese should be waking up by now.'

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Therese was sprawled across his bed with her perfectly dishevelled hair fanned across her tanned shoulders. The new monkey tattoo, peeked out from the sheet that was draped just so, across her left thigh. She groaned, woken by their arrival, then seeing Anna, sat up in the bed. 'Oh Anna! Sorry about yesterday. You made the flight – *obviously!*' Then running her fingers through her hair, 'Did Vincent tell you what happened?'

'Yes and I can't believe it.'

Smoothing her purple French knickers as she propped herself up in the bed, Therese sighed, 'I was really lucky.'

She always is, thought Anna, wondering if the Krishna singlet that rode up around her midriff had shrunk or was meant to be that small.

'Had quite a time of it in Brighton!'

'I thought you were visiting an old aunt?'

'I was! Even though Deirdre's a bit of a snob, she can be a lot of fun. Had some of her theatre 'pals' down from London. A few

minor celebs! Apologised because Glenda Jackson couldn't make it. How was Aeroflot?'

'It was fine – sat between two chain smokers, was served slimy salami on a rock hard roll. So Lufthansa eh? Oh!' Anna's stomach griped. 'Where's the bathroom?'

Therese pointed, continuing to enthuse, 'Yeah! Best flight ever. You should come to Brighton with me when we get back. It's so nice to get out of London...'

'Hang on!' said Anna, dashing down the hall.

'...and Deidre's place really is amazing; a sprawling Victorian flat, looking straight across the pier. She'll take us to high tea at the Grand'

From Vincent's tiny bathroom Anna was enjoying listening to Therese and Vincent's banter as she loitered, wondering who the slim, dark woman in the painting above the bath was. Although Vincent had said he lived alone Anna had sensed the presence of another even before she'd stepped inside the flat. Vincent was teasing Therese – who had a bit of a reputation for being 'not quite in touch'. They must have been talking about the Brighton bombing.

'You know I never watch the news, besides I was in India.'

'The Indian papers would've had a field day with it!'

'Perhaps. Who's this?' Therese must be asking about the painting beside the bed – that one was good too – though perhaps a little clichéd – a nude, save for a scrap of crimson velvet, of a similarly dark, slim woman, though with more voluminous black hair.

'A friend.'

'Not bad! Your type too – sultry, serious, a certain air of distraction! Lover or just another muse?'

'Shut-up Therese.'

'Come on Vincent, you know I don't *really* care.'

As she came back in to the bedroom, Anna exchanged glances with Therese; both were puzzled by Vincent's terseness and lack of humour. As he was bent over his pouch of tobacco Anna, who was dying to be alone with Therese to find out how he'd seemed last night, pulled a 'what's up with him' face. Therese shrugged. Of course it was quite possible they'd slept together but as Therese seemed equally puzzled by Vincent's demeanour a recent intimacy seemed unlikely. All this Anna gauged as he continued to roll; his mouth set hard in his thin face. It was unusual for Vincent to be so self-conscious.

'I love the painting in the bathroom Vincent. Is she Turkish?'

'Fuck, Sabine's her name. She's an artist's model. Two pounds an hour! The other one's a painter, *apparently*. What is it with you two?'

A little taken aback. Anna said. 'Okay! The Hagia Sophia beckons. Do you still want to meet for dinner?'

'Of course! Look I know I'm being a bit of a fuckwit – sorry, I'm just tired.' Vincent who'd been slumped against the wall stretched out next to Therese, tried for a lighter approach, 'And hungover! *Somebody* kept me up till three.'

Therese smiled at him, leant in as she got up and said, 'I don't feel so crash hot either.'

Tossing Anna a key from his bedside drawer, Vincent in a much more obliging tone said, 'We'll go somewhere nice for dinner, and don't lose it, I've only got the one.'

'What is it with these eyes?'

'Supposed to ward off evil, not working for me though!'

Therese and Anna exchanged let's get of here looks.

'Wait, I'm coming Anna. I'll quickly get changed' said Therese.



As the two women crossed the Galata Bridge sidestepping tourists and hawkers, Anna began to hum along with the early fifties smash hit, 'Istanbul not Constantinople' that was blaring from a fisherman's transistor radio. Therese who'd never heard it before looked bemused; not so the scrawny beggar, who shot Anna a toothless smile as he busied himself, setting up his pitch for the day.

'Why did they change the name from Constantinople, it sounds so much more exotic.'

'Something to do with the Romans or perhaps it was the Greeks?' Anna said, staring at a group of stylish women who were coming their way.

'Look at her – she should be on the catwalk!' said Therese.

'They all should!'' agreed Anna.

'Yeah, the men aren't nearly as attractive are they?'

'Dunno yet! They're sort of stocky aren't they!'

'And sleazy!'

'Really?'

According to Vincent!'

'He thinks all men are sleazy,' said Anna, 'besides they do recommend that we cover up. Look – he's not too bad!' Anna was eying a lanky young man in jeans and a puffy leather jacket with long curly hair, who was crossing the road toward them.

'Hmm!' Therese held his gaze as he passed, then turned her head to maintain eye contact.

'Therese!'

'What?'

'Don't!'

'You do it!'

'I don't!'

'In London you do!'

'Maybe occasionally there – but not here!'

‘I’m just having a bit of fun!’

The man leant against the bridge’s rail, smoothed his hair and headed back towards them. On more than one occasion Anna and Therese had discussed the average Londoner’s penchant for staring, a phenomenon so at odds with their usual reserve. When the man licked his lips as his hand slid to his crotch, Anna grabbed Therese’s hand and led her down a side alley.

‘Perhaps Vincent was right about Turkish men – so did you find out what’s up with him?’

‘He’s definitely not himself, seems like girl trouble.’

‘You didn’t sleep with him did you?’

‘And if I did?’

‘Fuck Therese I don’t *care*! I just thought he might be miserable because he’s feeling guilty.’ Therese looked confused.

‘Because of his girlfriend – isn’t she the woman in the paintings?’

‘I’m not sure, there are paintings of a couple of women – he says she’s not, but I think she is; she’s definitely his type. Not that the other woman isn’t. Oh look that’s where they stash all the old sultans. Shall we go in?’ They were in Sultanahmet, almost at the Hagia Sophia, so obviously the main tourist hub with its array of intense looking, carpet and jewellery sellers, parading their wares as they jostled for custom.

At the entrance to the museum they were handed pea green robes and headscarfs. Therese took a couple of pictures; a few of the tombs, but mostly of themselves swathed in the scratchy fabric. She asked an Englishwoman to take one of them both standing on either side of the grandest of the tombs as they made ‘come hither’ faces at each other. The Englishwoman, no doubt thinking them disrespectful, looked aghast at first, but when Therese insisted that the caretaker wasn’t at all concerned she snapped tentatively. After thanking her they wandered for a while, half-heartedly reading the

headstones, but apart from the opulent Ottoman fabrics the sultans were draped in, they found little to interest them and the conversation drifted back to Vincent.

‘He’s so much thinner!’ said Anna.

‘Yeah, it sort of suits him. I think Sabine, the model, is the one who’s organised the show in Berlin. When he was pissed he mentioned her a couple of times – in passing of course, insisting she was ‘just a friend’ but.... she’s got to be the one in the paintings.’

‘I only saw one of her.’ said Anna.

‘No, there’s more.’

‘Really! Did he show you last night?’

‘Not exactly! I had a bit of a rummage when he went to get cigarettes. Can you believe he hates Sobranies!’ Anna laughed.

‘I think Sabine might be German.’

‘Or French! There’s some French lipstick in the bathroom drawer. Maybe she’s just away.’

‘No... not the impression I got...’ Therese was ruminating on Vincent’s comment last night when she was stroking his back, and then his front... – “you know my heart’s not in this Therese, but of course if you insist...”

‘There are other things I noticed too.’ Anna said, sensing Therese knew more than she was letting on.

‘Like what?’

‘Herbal tea, vitamins, conditioner.’

‘Sleuth!’ Therese joked.

‘So apart from the girl trouble how did he seem?’

‘Not great – quite maudlin actually! But he did take me to a fantastic bar, where he seemed to know *everyone*; he even has a handle on the language. Perhaps you were right about letting him know we were coming though. I thought he’d be excited – but seems like he’s rather pre-occupied.’

‘I think he’s depressed about turning twenty-eight.’

‘Maybe. He was even saying nice things about Julia; you know, kind of reminiscing.’

‘Really! He’s in quite a bad way then – we *could* stay where I stayed last night. It has an amazing view and it’s cheap.’

While they were gauging the speed of the queue outside the Blue Mosque a debonair, fortyish man, dressed in a cream polyester shirt, tan slacks and expensive looking moccasins, made a beeline for them. In impeccable English, he offered to be their guide, suggesting that for a very small extra fee, he could also arrange for them to enter the mosque through an exclusive, secret passageway. Having just spied the infamous ‘Pudding Shop Café’ and already sick of being hustled, they managed to escape him, taking a business card and promising to visit his antique shop soon. Inside the café hippies from all over Europe were gathered: sharing platters of meze, drinking beer and smoking furiously. And as if the place wasn’t crowded enough, a double decker Contiki bus arrived, unloading another twenty or so young Aussies and Kiwis.

Therese and Anna began showing off their newly acquired English accents, confusing two blonde surfer types, unaware that they were being observed by a handsome, young Turkish man, who was seated, at a nearby table.

‘Sure you’re sure you’re not?’ Wayne from Perth was asking Anna. ‘Thought I could hear y’know a bit of a y’know twang?’

Therese snickered and said, ‘Anna ’ere’s a Londoner and I’m from Cambridge!’ Wayne looked suspicious and quit them to buy beer.

As the café was full now, the young Turk got up to give his table to the last few Aussies that had straggled in with an older bedraggled man, whom Anna surmised was the tour bus driver. Balancing his coffee on his knee, the young, Turk asked Therese if he could share their ashtray.

‘Of course!’ Therese slid across the worn velvet bench seat to make way for him for she had just found her second handsome local. Mustafa with his smooth coffee coloured skin, black lustrous hair, and sapphire eyes; despite his modern clothes, which were fashionable even by London standards, was every bit her Ottoman Prince. And as well as being charming, he was also flirtatious.

‘So did you leave your boyfriends in England?’

‘No we don’t have boyfriends, and we’ll let you in on a little secret, we’re not really English, we were just teasing those boys.’ Mustafa looked amused.

After correctly guessing that they were both twenty-four Mustafa set about also guessing their star signs. One out of two was not so bad; he picked Therese for ‘a Libran’ but mistook Anna for a Gemini. Then they had to guess his. Therese and Anna feigned furious concentration, before finally agreeing he was also twenty-four. He clapped delightedly, even though he was only twenty, and when they correctly guessed he was a Scorpio, well ‘on the cusp’ he was ecstatic.

‘You’ll have to meet our friend Vincent, said Therese ‘He’s a *real* Scorpio!’

Underlying Mustafa’s frivolity Anna sensed a certain anxiety to keep them entertained. After insisting they share a ‘village breakfast’ (they were obviously quite the thing here) he guessed that Therese was a painter (she joking that he must have stolen her passport) after which they began a more protracted, rather pretentious discussion about art. As Therese and Mustafa proceeded to one-up each other, Anna’s amusement paled. They were being quite loud, and although they concurred that Beckman and Matisse were among their favourites, they started into an obscure argument, something to do with Blue Rider movement, barely touching the breakfast when it arrived.

‘Come on, I can’t eat another one of these by myself!’ When Anna gave Therese a pleading look, Mustafa realising they weren’t

being very inclusive turned his charms on Anna, ‘I’m guessing you didn’t go to art school Anna?’

‘No I’m not really arty, sounds like you did though?’

‘No, I only want to go to The Slade! So what are your plans for the rest of the day?’

‘We’re going to the Blue Mosque, we tried to go before but were besieged by guides – perhaps it’ll be quieter there this afternoon.’

Mustafa insisted it would be better to wait until tomorrow when all the cruise ships had left town. He and Therese were really hitting it off, for when he insisted that he owned an original Chagall, she hooted loud and long. Fairly sure he was joking, Anna was curious and taken with him enough, to agree to go to his house. They could, after all do much worse than an encounter with such a princely charlatan. Therese offered to pay for the breakfast, but their waiter insisted it had been taken care of, deflecting to Mustafa who ushered them into a waiting taxi.

After leaving the cafe, they drove through the old part of the city, puzzled by the tension between Mustafa and the driver. Mustafa was able to switch tones and languages seamlessly – one minute barking in Turkish, the next beguiling Therese, and Anna too now, with his knowledge of all things “English”. When the driver interrupted to point out a famous bathhouse, Mustafa’s sudden snarl cowed him into silence. Then, when they arrived at Mustafa’s house, after gruffly dismissing him, Mustafa slammed the passenger door, linked arms with Anna and Therese and chanted, ‘Let the fun begin!’

All the houses in this street were grand, but Mustafa’s, with its European trees, tightly clipped hedgerows, and manicured rose garden was the most opulent. When an elderly gardener who was trimming the camellias nodded at Mustafa, and Mustafa neglected to acknowledge him, it confirmed Anna’s mounting suspicion that rather than being some twenty-year old eccentric, Mustafa was more likely a spoilt rich kid. She glanced at Therese, who not appearing to

have noticed his lack of manners, remained completely in his thrall. When they arrived at the huge, medieval looking front door and Mustafa pressed the bell a sepulchral sound ensued. Odd that he didn't have his own key? A brusque, squat woman let them in but only after staring blankly at Therese and Anna. At least Mustafa spoke to her, though tersely, exchanging just a few words before she sighed and disappeared into another part of the house.

Quickly recovering his *joy de vivre* Mustafa led them into an extravagant room, more a salon really, with its emerald chintz drapes, pink damask lounges and silk rugs, all of which appeared to float on a sea of milky marble. He invited them to sit – the lounges were so deep and plush they almost demanded indolence and there could be seen scattered amongst the Ottoman accoutrements, antique vases filled with flowers, ferns, orchids and filigree boxes, as well as paintings, modern expensive looking ones, and a sculpture, that resembled a Giacometti. Two cats slunk past and wound through Mustafa's legs. Observing how much Mustafa was enjoying Therese's delight Anna decided she should lighten up – clearly he just loved a new audience, and really it was hardly his fault that he was rude to the staff – obviously that's how he'd been brought up – still it was hard to discern if his parents (presumably?) were business people or Turkish aristocrats.

After playfully relieving them of their shoes, he darted out into the hallway, where he, carefully, almost ceremoniously, placed them in a neat line next to his own, before offering them each a Marlboro and a plate of dried figs, as he busied himself lighting incense and retrieving a gold enamel bowl from the inside of an antique bureau. Then he put Duran Duran on the expensive looking turntable and with a saucy swivel of his hips asked if they'd like a cocktail.

He'd been in the kitchen a while when Anna whispered to Therese, 'Do you think he's on something?'

'No! Stop worrying, we're here to have fun!'

‘I keep expecting his mother to arrive, tipsy from some long lunch.’

‘Lunch?’ and he was back in the room slopping pink liquid from an overfilled, crystal jug onto one of the silk rugs.

‘That’s ‘Lurlique’ isn’t it?’ asked Therese raising a surreptitious eyebrow at Anna who was helping him steady it. Surely he hadn’t heard the reference to his mother with how loud the stereo was!

‘Yes. Got in Paris. Paid too much, but then it’s part of my collection...’

‘How beautiful!’ exclaimed Anna, examining it more closely, impressed that Therese knew what it was.

‘Let’s go out to the terrace. I’ll order something from the kitchen. And by the way my mother died when I was seven just after my father disappeared.’

Anna and Therese looked slightly mortified but Mustafa quickly changed the subject, asking them whereabouts they ‘stayed’ in London. His confidence, manner and dedication to art, particularly for a twenty year-old were intriguing. In the hour and a half they’d known him they’d learnt that he spoke English and German as well as his native Turkish; that he loved the Tate Gallery, that ‘Heaven’ (in London off course), was his favourite nightclub and that the *only* music he listened to was British. And then there was the Chagall?

The obvious question was how by such a tender age had he amassed his fortune. Even as a criminal he would have had to work harder than he seemed capable of to obtain what was so casually his. Despite his large frame, he was over six foot and still rangy, he seemed to get tipsy quite quickly.

‘This is my favourite!’ he said, jumping up to stomp about to ‘Planet Earth’. When he sat down again, flopping his arms on the side of the lounge behind Anna she had to blurt, ‘So who else lives here Mustafa?’



Therese frowned at Anna's direct question, while Mustafa, who either didn't hear or pretended not to, said, 'You're hungry, I'll go and see what's happened to lunch.' Then turning as if it were an afterthought, 'Why don't you see if you can find my Chagall?'

Anna and Therese ventured tentatively into the hall that could easily have been the modernist section of a small gallery. There was an American expressionist painting that Therese thought resembled a Rothko and another that could have passed for a Mondrian.

'I wonder if he's put something in our drinks? I'm feeling a bit queasy, think I'll sit down.' Therese's late night, the whisky, her unease about seducing Vincent and now the surreal-ness of Mustafa and his house were catching up with her.

'Doubt it, he's the one who's pissed!' said Anna, joining Therese on the floor.

'Perhaps he really isn't kidding about the Chagall – the Lurlique's genuine...' mused Therese.

Anna drained the last of the pink gin or whatever it was, and from her prone position on the rug, grinned at Therese.

'A bit of crystal hardly equates to a priceless painting!'

'Okay Anna you're right as usual. Still damn good copies!'

'Copies?' Laughed Mustafa from the top of the stairs, before sliding down the banister of the mahogany staircase. Wearing red leather pants, a white pirate shirt and a skull-bone, bandana he looked all set to hit a nightclub, and perhaps for the rich kids in Istanbul this is what afternoons were for?

'Do you think I'd invite you to view a fake?' He looked faux offended as he addressed Therese, but quickly recovered, insisting that they both dance. He flipped the record and while they were cavorting to 'Girls On Film' Therese said that they were having so much fun, they really didn't mind if he'd been kidding about the Chagall. Mustafa smiled and chuckled her under the chin.

They'd drained the contents of the jug, and since Mustafa had taken to dancing with his image in the full length, gilt mirror, Anna and Therese thought they'd retreat to the terrace. As soon as they'd gotten up though he pulled them towards him, insisting they keep dancing.

'Only if you play something else.' Anna demanded.

He tossed a few album covers about and held up *Soft Cell*.

Before long he had them in hysterics, singing along, half in Turkish, as he acted out the tragic lyrics, to the most dramatic song on what was a very theatrical album. When it ended and they all fell in a heap, this time on the other rug, a cream flokati. Anna began to tell Mustafa about Vincent, about how good an artist, albeit undiscovered he was. Mustafa was saying it was a perfect name for a painter when the brusque woman who'd answered the door appeared with a tray of what looked like last night's pizza. Therese, who was playing with the dregs of her ice, smiled at her, but the woman's thin lips remained taciturn, her air of disapproval, slicing through the boozy atmosphere.

'Perhaps we should get going soon!' Anna suggested.

'Huh? Ignore her. Stupid peasant – she's just jealous she's not young or pretty like us! And look at this – this is not Turkish pizza!' He held up the limpest looking piece.

Anna said, 'It's delicious!' The woman was glaring. Then to Therese, 'But we really should go soon. We're supposed to be meeting our friend.'

'This is my home! I am it's the master!' Mustafa was rifling through the bar. 'Ah here it is! Turkey's answer to everything!' He filled three small glasses. After the gin the raki tasted rough.

'No, no like this!' Mustafa said, swilling the spirit in one of the shot glasses he'd just produced.

After skolling hers Therese said, 'Okay Mustafa I have to know – *were* you kidding about the Chagall?'

‘No! Can’t you see it!’ He was giggling, as he rolled around on the flokati.

‘Lie down and look up to your right!’ He spluttered, choking on the raki.

When they looked up there was a painting, a small one – of a red horse and an almost full moon, set into the wall, just above the mosaicked alcove.

‘The Circus Rider?’ asked Therese.

‘But it can’t be!’ protested Anna. He’s just died. It would be worth a bomb! And besides isn’t it in New York – at MOMA?’

But Mustafa had lost interest – he was now clumsily stuffing clumps of hashish into a pipe. ‘Like some?’

‘Okay,’ said Therese, tentatively. Had she not recently read *Midnight Express* she might have been more blasé.

‘I’m not sure it’s such a good idea...’ Anna hated how stuffy she knew she must have sounded, and even though Mustafa’s ‘house’ seemed to be cloaked in the equivalence of diplomatic immunity she felt they really hadn’t gotten the measure of him yet. But she supposed they could at least be sure that a parent wouldn’t suddenly appear, well fairly sure.

Mustafa laughed. ‘Ah tourists! So much bad stuff you read about Turkey. Turkey doesn’t care. You kill someone here; you can be free in a year! Why you are worrying about a little hashish. This is not Iran. Not Saudi Arabia! I am not a barbarian!’ and smoothing his Paul Smith silk shirt, for the first time he seemed genuinely upset about the perception of his country.

‘No, I didn’t mean... it’s beautiful here and so cosmopolitan... it’s just that we were told that with foreigners the police could be...’ Anna didn’t bother finishing the sentence. Therese shrugged and passed her the pipe. She took a couple of drags – it seemed rude not to. The atmosphere in the smoke filled room, felt a little ambiguous – the music had stopped and Mustafa

seemed tired, or perhaps bored. Anna and Therese exchanged glances – yes, it was almost certainly time that they left. Then Mustafa, seemingly emerging from his momentary fug, rose from his prone position to sit between them, again (they’d moved back to the damask lounge) then, extending his arms around them both, said desultorily, ‘Come I’ll show you some more of my collection.’

At the top of the stairs which they climbed a little woozily, there were several rooms, bedrooms presumably, except for a small attic, which Anna couldn’t help noticing was locked.

‘This way please – my favourite room!’ Mustafa said, taking Anna’s hand.

Enjoying how much they were gawping at the elaborate, gaudy suite, he leapt onto the oversized waterbed, which sloshed under his weight. Therese and Anna were marvelling at the bathrooms that bookended the bedroom, one was blue, and one green – both were iridescent and bedecked with gold fittings and animal print towels. Mustafa was like a child at a slumber party – trying to do headstands, then, falling off the bed giggling.

‘Do you have water beds in Australia?’ he asked, seemingly without irony. To Therese’s bemusement, Anna replied that she didn’t think so.

They’d almost finished the half bottle of raki when the afternoon light began to fade and Anna, who wasn’t as stoned as Therese noticed that though they were getting steadily drunker Mustafa seemed to be sobering up. He’d made another call, to the maid presumably, demanding coffee.

When the maid appeared with the coffee Mustafa leapt to answer the telephone – that, this time sounded like an external line. The maid (if she was the maid) made no secret of the fact that she was listening, as she hovered in the hallway, taking in as Anna and Therese did, Mustafa’s surprisingly respectful tone as he glanced around the mess that was the living room. He spoke gruffly to her and she snarled back in Turkish before snatching the glasses, pizza

plates, and ashtray. Even the undrunk coffee was whisked away. Mustafa said to ignore her, insisting he'd had a *fabulous* afternoon, but, had forgotten he had to be somewhere at six. And a taxi was outside, waiting to take them back to their hotel. Escorting them out, he brightened considerably, insisting they come to dinner later that week, perhaps Friday, yes Friday! Anna scrawled Vincent's address on a business card. Mustafa would send a car to collect them at seven, and they *must* bring Vincent!

'Shall I explain where it is? It's quite hard to find...' said Anna.

Reading the address, Mustafa declared, 'For me not. Opposite the guitar shop, yes?'

'Exactly!' answered Therese. Pre-occupied, Mustafa closed the car door and dashed back inside.

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Vincent had had all morning to think. Though he was hardly able to concentrate on much other than Sabine and the fact that he may no longer be in the exhibition, he missed Anna and was fond of Therese and knew that so far he had been a dreadful host. And to be perfectly selfish, wasn't this exactly what he needed right now – the company of good friends, the chance to ruminate on their recent lives – to gain a bit of perspective. Last night with Therese was a pleasant distraction that he hoped she hadn't mentioned to Anna. He wanted Anna's advice on Sabine and she'd underrate his feelings if she knew he'd been so easily, well, distracted... He cleaned the flat, went to the markets and bought cheese, fruit and wine, and pulled out an old canvas of Sabine. He'd finished it really but wanted Anna and Therese to think he was working. It was one of his favourite paintings of her, from the first or was it the second time she'd sat for him...

'And how was your first day in Istanbul?'

‘Fantastic, we met a very amusing man, well boy, who took us back to his place...he’s absolutely loaded, and, has an original Chagall.’

‘What? Are you stoned?’ Vincent, joking: pretended to smell their breath.

‘And pissed!’ Therese said, collapsing onto the couch.

‘I’ve bought some Turkish wine. It’s much better than that bloody ‘Piat Dor’ you drink in London, and half the price!’ Vincent was glad he was making more of an effort, especially since it was evident that they were very capable of having fun without him.

‘Oh that is nice.’ Anna sipped thoughtfully. ‘We’ve actually moved on to a Bordeaux Vincent – it’s fifty pence more, but *so* much smoother!

‘So you’re already mixing with the natives then?’

‘Mustafa’s more ‘international’ – I mean he’s definitely from here but he’s...’

‘He’s rich, cute and rather up himself, but he’s only twenty, and he really wants to meet *you*!’ enthused Therese.

‘Why – what did you tell him?’

‘How charming and talented you are!’

‘He and Therese *really* hit it off!’

‘Oh shut up Anna! He’s hardly my type!’

‘Well I just thought he might be a nice addition to your list of exotic conquests!’

Vincent laughed at Therese, who though she was pretending to be insulted, was secretly pleased with Anna’s referral to her erotic prowess and said, ‘Sounds interesting. You’re sure he’s Turkish and not some Arabian oil tycoon?’ Perhaps Therese would be discreet about last night, he thought – especially if she was intrigued by some crazy Turk. Vincent wasn’t proud of his behaviour last night, even though he’d expressed his ennui it was still wrong. But she had insisted...

‘No, if anything his connections are with England,’ said Anna.

‘He served Gordon’s gin!’

‘Really?’ said Vincent. ‘A rich, young, hash smoking, gin drinking, Turkish Anglophile! Let’s go now!’

‘Maybe he’s a smuggler or an international art dealer, or both. Seems a bit too ditsy though,’ said Therese.

‘Ditsy?’ asked Vincent.

They took the second bottle of wine with them to the restaurant Vincent had chosen but when they got there it was full and despite his laying on the charm he still couldn’t get them in. Anna was surprised how disappointed he seemed, but put it down to the fact that he wasn’t above showing off how ‘at home’ he was in Istanbul to a couple of old friends.

‘I know a place’ said Therese. ‘It’s meant to be a bit of a hang, read about it in *Time Out*.’

‘What’s it called?’ said Vincent, his tone grown sceptical.

‘Bar Londra.’

‘It’s not great – it’s too trendy!’

‘Oh, sounds fun!’ said Anna.

‘Yeah!’ agreed Therese. ‘We’ve brought a few fancy clothes. C’mon Vincent, do you know where it is?’

‘It’s not far. You have to pay to get in though and they don’t have much in the way of food. Thought you wanted to eat?’

‘Not really, we can eat later.’

Hotel Londra was almost full when they arrived. Decorated lavishly in the traditional style, it was also quirky; with antique birdcages, complete with alarmingly life-like, stuffed birds, hanging from its ornate ceilings. The waiters with their Bryan Ferry style, slicked back, hair were surly and the patrons were mostly hip, glam/punk types who gave off a self conscious, post-modern air –

not unlike the actor types that frequented Arthur's in Kings Cross, Anna thought.

After they'd jostled their way in, swaying to Nina Hagen's version of 'My Way', Vincent tried to escort them to a discreet dark alcove but Therese demanded to be in the main section and managed to sweet talk a waiter into squashing a couple more chairs onto a bench table. Now seated, after smiling an apology at the two girls who had to shift along (their view of the room, now compromised by a marble pillar) they resumed their discussion of Mustafa and his paintings.

'They've got to be fakes. I mean there's plenty of old money here, but you'd hardly drag a couple of tourists over if you had...'

'Thanks!' Therese feigned insult, 'Maybe *he* could see that we *weren't* your average tourist.'

Vincent looked unconvinced and then annoyed when a waiter brushed past him delivering mezze plates. Anna and Therese glanced at each other bemused. An attractive woman with smoky eye make-up, dressed in a red velvet sheath, walked past and instead of admiring her (Vincent's vantage for doing so discreetly was perfect), he looked glumly into his glass. Just as Anna was thinking she had a familiar air, the woman turned and leant into Vincent, and after re-balancing on equally red velvet stilettos, whispered something that sounded rather caustic in Turkish. Still avoiding looking at her, Vincent seemed unable to respond. The woman looked irritated, shifted her weight and with a hand on her hip, spoke to him again, this time much less discreetly, causing another woman, who was similarly theatrically dressed to lead her away to, what was presumably their table.

'Who was that?'

'Nobody, let's get out of here, I'm starving!'

'Let's order something *here* then, the food looks okay.' suggested Anna.



‘It’s not! It’s terrible and besides I’ve still got the other bottle of wine. We can hardly drink it here.’

‘Kidding aren’t you! The place is packed.’ Therese began digging around in her bag for something she could use as a corkscrew.

‘No. Let’s just go. You wouldn’t hang out in a place like this if we were at home!’

‘But we’re not. We’re in Istanbul! You go, Therese and I’ll get a cab.’

Therese looked at Anna, and then at Vincent, who was making moves to leave.

‘We *could* go and eat with him and then come back?’

Anna tried to conciliate but Vincent was adamant he was leaving. ‘I feel like shit. I’ll leave the key under the mat.’

Then as soon as Anna was sure Vincent had left she said, ‘It’s her! The woman in the painting!’

Therese looked puzzled.

‘The miniature by the bed!’ Anna explained.

‘No I don’t think that’s Sabine. There are more paintings under the bed, of a different woman, a girl really, even more striking and darker. Whoever *she* is, she’s definitely not happy with Vincent. I can see why he didn’t want to come here.’

Anna and Therese looked over to where the woman was seated; another woman had just joined her group, and surrounded by her fashionable friends she’d regained her composure. She seemed calm – offhand even, and after a shot or two of raki, began throwing furtive glances their way. When she fixed her gaze on Therese, Therese stared straight back at her, emboldened by the wine and curious to find out what her agenda was. At this the woman tossed her head back, her black mane whipping her friend’s face, as she turned into the security of her circle.

‘Definitely an actress!’ declared Therese.

‘She could just as easily be an artist.’ Still discussing her they hadn’t realised she’d left her friends and was again approaching their table. Beautiful, in a defiant, bar-hall kind of way and either drunk or swaggering for effect, she was rather intimidating.

‘Tell your friend or your boyfriend or *whatever* he is that he’s out of the exhibition!’

Therese and Anna leant in. Still a little stoned, they were having trouble understanding her accent, especially since the band – a wall of industrial noise, had just cranked up.

‘The one in Berlin?’ asked Therese.

‘Yes. He can pick up his work at my *apartman* and soon. I’m leaving Thursday.’

‘That’s just three days away!’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay, so what’s the address?’

‘He knows.’

‘Why didn’t you tell him yourself?’

‘Pardon?’

‘You were just talking to him. Why didn’t...’

‘Because *I* just found out for *myself*! See my friend there – she is just come from Berlin now. *Okay?*’

Anna nodded, bemused by how aggressive she was, and also confused about the paintings – didn’t Vincent think they were already in Berlin? She glanced at Therese, whose expression to those that didn’t know her might have appeared neutral. Shoving the cork back into the bottle she’d just opened Therese challenged the woman, ‘But Vincent has had the paintings couriered to the exhibition, already!’

‘And Sabine has sent them back! By Thursday!’ then softening slightly she added, ‘He can use my friend’s van.’

In a small fish restaurant affording a glimpse of the Bosphorous, they ordered mezze plates and calamari. It was only about nine and since they hadn't planned on such an early night they dawdled over the food, drained a large bottle of water, and then another as a couple of men at a nearby table flashed eager eyes at them. Therese smiled back wanly before launching into an analysis of Vincent's love life.

'He's cut quite a swathe with the ladies here!'

'*She* was pissed off. So do you think he was on with both of them?'

'Seems like it! No wonder he hasn't come back to London!' said Therese.

'I don't think so' mused Anna 'Why would he be so depressed?'

'Maybe because he has too many lovers and no friends.'

'Sounds like a good problem!' Anna said, looking slightly despondent.

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing. It's just that unlike you and Vincent, apart from that two-timing Sean I haven't met anyone for ages.'

'I've hardly been reeling them in!'

'I dunno – the Japanese new waver!'

'That was a one-off!'

'The Mexican Marxist *and* then the exotic Afghan – he sounded nice.'

'*Kossim* was nice! Shame I wasn't.'

'If you'd met him at home, would you have gone out with him?'

'Maybe...'

'Those baggy pants would have gone down well at 'The Talofa Club!'' Anna had pored through Therese's Indian photos in

London. Therese laughed, before ruminating about whether Vincent's 'Aussie-ness' had contributed to his romantic allure in Istanbul.

'He'd be appalled if you suggested that,' said Anna.

'I know, remind me to bring it up!

Vincent was painting when they returned home at eleven; the small living area felt manic, transformed as it was into a smoke-filled, studio. He was uncharacteristically applying paint in thick manly daubs. And employing neither subject nor style, he seemed to be embracing his nemesis – abstraction. For Anna and Therese dinner had turned into a few more drinks, (the waiters had insisted on plying them with raki) after which they spent at least an hour getting rid of a second pair of amorous Turkish gentlemen, who had at first seemed amusing.

'Didn't expect to see you so soon?' said Vincent, who though he barely looked at either of them, seemed in better spirits.

'We left the bar just after you did – ended up in Istikal Street. Brought you some leftovers.'

After watching him eat with more relish than they'd seen so far Anna took it as a sign he was feeling better and decided to tell him what the woman in the bar had said.

'That woman, the one in red – she gave us a message.'

'Oh?' Vincent stopped eating, turning suddenly pale.

'Are you okay?' asked Therese.

'Of course I'm fucking okay!'

Therese glanced at Anna, her concern patently obvious to Vincent.

'What is it with you two?'

Anna seeing that Therese was floundering said, 'Well it's about the exhibition.'

'Nothing to do with her!'

'Who is she?'

‘Nadia – what’d she say?’

‘She said...’ Therese stalled, looking at Anna for reassurance.

‘What? Don’t patronise me Therese?’ Therese gave Vincent a hurt look and he realised he was risking exposure but this was more important.

‘I’m not!’

‘So what the fuck did Nadia say?’

‘So she is a friend?’ asked Anna.

‘She *was* a friend but now she’s more of a pain in the arse.’

Therese was studying Vincent’s painting. ‘This one reminds me of that Greek painter in Rozelle.’

‘Demos! Thanks Therese!’ He supposed it was fair that she shot a barb at him.

‘Not the actual *painting*, just the texture.’

‘Don’t talk shit! What’d Nadia say; Anna?’

‘She was brief, but something about Sabine having to change things around.’

Vincent didn’t speak; just stared, intimating that Anna should continue.

‘For the show...’

‘Oh so now Nadia’s in it! Fucking typical!’

‘No... she just said that you were no longer in it.’

Therese interrupted. ‘So ...what’s Nadia’s stuff like?’

‘Contrived!’ Vincent said, discarding his brush and slumping down onto the lounge next to Therese. Anna and Therese exchanged a weary glance, Therese placing a tentative arm around his shoulder. Tensing, he shrugged her off and stomped out to the hall. They listened to him dialling, his agitation palpable as he waited for a connection. Therese put on Anna’s compilation tape, the one she’d made for Vincent just prior to coming to Turkey, and Anna poured

him a whisky and took it out to the hall, where he was hunched over the wall phone.

Finally he got through. They assumed it was Sabine that he was talking to, he sounded subdued but reasonable, speaking first in Turkish, then resorting to English, but half way through the sixty-minute tape, just as Morrissey's 'This Charming Man' came on, he became distraught. After what felt like a long silence he slammed down the receiver and didn't come back into the lounge room. Anna and Therese, unsure what to do, (they were fairly sure he was crying), left the tape on and pretended to be asleep on the futon they'd hastily rolled out when he'd slammed the receiver.

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The women made themselves scarce over the next two days. They took the ferry across to the Asian side, visited a bathhouse, and spent a whole afternoon at the Grand Bazaar, none of which interested Vincent in the slightest. In fact as talking to him seemed to elicit little more than monosyllabic responses, they'd taken to hanging around the flat until about eleven, then, leaving it before he rose. When they returned, usually around four or five he would greet them with the dregs of a bottle of wine, or worse, raki, and still he had done nothing about picking up the paintings. He had until tomorrow.

On Thursday morning, the day before the proposed rendezvous with Mustafa, Vincent woke before Anna and Therese and made coffee, and since he seemed in a more affable mood Therese tried to entice him into coming to Kadikoy. He had always romanticised the seafaring life and the mention of a misty ferry ride seemed to do the trick. Since Monday night he'd refused to talk about Sabine or Nadia and it seemed that he hadn't left the house, which was why they were surprised when they could barely pass through the hallway for the stack of canvasses, stacked against the wall.

The thrum of the ferry, negated the need for small talk and as Vincent's mood was still tenuous neither Therese nor Anna mentioned the paintings. And although they were considering moving to Anice's for the remainder of the week, broaching the subject with Vincent seemed too delicate.

Leaving him alone to smoke furiously and grow even more emaciated did, however mean they saw a lot more of the city. Still happy to drink, he'd managed to drain both their bottles of duty free, and half the wine they'd bought, as he sat, largely disinterested, listening to the minutia of their day. Though once he apologised for his lack of humour, mostly he was alarmingly self-absorbed, or as Anna put it in an aside to Therese 'the master of malaise!' Therese wondered if part of his anguish was down to pride, but when his anger quickly dissipated, giving way to a sombre, unrelenting hopelessness, it seemed that it could be none other than heartbreak that ravaged him so. He'd always been passionate and somewhat easy to rile, but more about issues and people that pissed him off (of which there were many). On anything so personal, neither Anna nor Therese had seen him lose his equilibrium, well not this much. In fact this was his area of expertise: relationships, understanding modern young women, being able to *really* talk to them, or so he would jokingly claim. He'd been hurt, yes a little, but he prided himself on his resilience, his ability to 'shift the perspective'. Though guilty of quoting John Berger too much, he was, amongst his peers someone considered capable of dishing out decent advice. Anna, who had sought his counsel once or twice, secretly considered his to be quite predictable – invariably he'd suggest 'getting really drunk', 'going overseas' or 'moving on'. She knew of at least two occasions where he'd personally assisted women with the third option! She wondered if mentioning this might make him laugh. She even remembered one case in point: Edwina the screen printer. Anna started delicately, 'It doesn't suit you to be depressed!' Careful not to spout any of his old advice back at him, she was surprised when

he snapped, 'Shut up Anna; you couldn't possibly understand!' just as the ferry lurched.

Therese pulled a faux, horrified face.

'Because I've never been heartbroken?' Anna was plainly insulted.

'Sorry!' was all Vincent would say.

Therese tried to change the subject, invoking the tonal quality of his new work, forgetting momentarily that she was only supposed to have seen the three of canvasses on the walls of his flat. It didn't matter – it seemed that he wasn't listening anyway. Nor it seemed had the other night had any impact at all. She'd forget about it, they were drunk. She was glad she hadn't told Anna.

Despite their meandering conversation, the ferry ride was somehow uplifting. A family of gypsies, the mother steely eyed, the father grim, sat across from them. The smallest of the children, a rattily dressed girl, dirty from her dark curly head to her tiny feet could easily have been a changeling, Anna thought, watching as her bright clear eyes switched from angelic to demonic as she tried to get Vincent's attention. Therese and Anna watched enthralled; as for the first time in days a real smile began to tease the corners of his mouth. The girl's mother, who had not appeared to be watching her daughter at all, suddenly spun round in her seat and flashing her ice-blue eyes at Vincent, offered to read his palm.

'Go on!' said Therese. 'If you don't I will!'

Needing no encouragement the woman grabbed his hand, holding it tightly in her own as she stared intently into his eyes. Some of the other passengers stopped talking, straining to hear what the gypsy woman had to say. As she spoke only Turkish, Therese and Anna, tried to gauge their reactions, as they waited for Vincent to translate.

He gave her the ten lire she requested. The reading had lasted no more than five minutes, after which the young girl began



harassing the mother for what must have been her cut. Vincent gave the child five lire, at which she beamed and scampered toward the ferry's cafeteria, with her mother screaming after her. Something the woman had said had struck a chord with Vincent; he was visibly transformed.

Therese offered the woman her palm but she refused to read it. Puzzled, Therese pulled out a twenty lire note. Still she refused, staring again at Vincent and tapping her head as she pointed at his; implying that he had the answers.

'What'd she say?' Therese grew impatient. She was quite keen on fortune-tellers, tarot, and the like and sensed that this woman had 'it'. Even though he was still slumped on the hard wooden bench, with his bony elbow resting on the ferry's window ledge, Vincent's aura was visibly lighter. Therese put on her most forlorn expression trying to ameliorate the fortune-teller, but all she did was smile, tap her head again and point at Vincent's.

After disembarking at Kadikoy they followed the crowd that drifted towards the row of cafes and market stalls that lined the water's edge, watching the gypsy family assembling their possessions as they argued with the ferry-master. Vincent linked arms with Anna and Therese, declaring that he had just had an epiphany; 'Well sort of' he qualified. 'The gypsy woman was right, "No good would come of the woman with the big black eyes!"'

'Sabine?' said Therese.

'No, hers are blue; she means Nadia – the woman from Bar Londra. Okay I'll explain – it's embarrassing.'

Vincent suggested Balik, a small fish café at end of the pier, where, after Anna poured him a glass of wine, for the first time since they'd arrived, Vincent began to open up, 'Sabine is, I suppose I should say, *was* my girlfriend. We were spending a lot of time together – we'd made a commitment of sorts. At least *I* thought we had. She's very ambitious. Not financially, but in the art world,

which bothered me at first, until I began to find it, well if not endearing, sort of motivating.'

Anna and Therese exchange amused glances as Vincent lit a cigarette.

'Go on...' said Anna.

Vincent paused, gauging their mirth.

'What?' asked Anna!

'I saw that look! I know I don't sound myself.

'No I think it's good, it's just hearing *you* say motivating I suppose...'

'Anyway she *motivated* me, got me painting at least and well – the more time I spent with her the more I wanted to, so I asked her to move in, but she didn't want to, which of course made me like her more! Then when she realised I could barely pay the rent she suggested Nadia, a friend of a friend of hers from Berlin move in. As she had a boyfriend here it should have meant that I would have had my place to myself most of the time.'

'How come Sabine didn't move in with you?' asked Therese.

'She has the whole downstairs of her parent's place in Beyoglu.'

'Even I know that's a cool place! So did you hang out there mainly?'

'Not quite, only when her parents weren't there! Her father is old fashioned in ways both Turkish *and* German and lets say he envisaged a more lofty future for his glamorous and only daughter, even though she's thirty. At best he would tolerate me. At first I tried to impress him but he let me know pretty quickly not to bother. Anyway Nadia had moved in.'

'She's quite stunning. Wasn't Sabine a little jealous?'

'You haven't seen Sabine! It was fine with Nadia at first; when she did stay at her boyfriend's. She'd always been interested in painting but hadn't done much since art school, so when she started

borrowing my brushes and stuff it was pretty annoying. But I didn't want to seem petty...'

Anna said, 'God forbid' and Therese chortled, topping up their wine.

'So basically she got all inspired and I found myself giving her painting lessons!'

'Did she know you never went to art school?'

'I don't know but she kept asking me questions, it was pretty annoying!'

'Like what?'

'Technical shit – perspective...'

'Oh can you teach me?' joked Therese.

'Ha ha! So anyway once she got the hang of it again, painting I mean, she asked if she could paint Sabine too. Since Sabine had stopped charging for her services I could hardly say no; and though they weren't close, they were becoming friends. It pissed me off. At first I made half-hearted jokes about the lack of space but they could tell I wasn't amused. Then slowly they began to tease me. It was so subtle at first I wondered if I might be smoking too much dope. Their camaraderie evolved quickly, it seemed they often didn't even need to speak, and when they did their Turkish was so fast I couldn't understand it anyway. I got a little paranoid, thought they were doing it on purpose, even thought they were in love, then I'd feel ridiculous; Nadine's endless joints weren't helping. Sabine would compliment Nadine on her progress, I'd get irritated and then slowly, I began to sense Nadine was enjoying herself. I did my best to ignore them both, which of course didn't help my relationship with Sabine.

And just when I thought things couldn't get any worse Nadia split up with her boyfriend, which meant that she never left my flat, except perhaps to duck out for cigarettes, which she had begun to smoke furiously.'

Therese raised a sceptical eyebrow. Vincent had just lit one cigarette from another.

‘I know! But she wasn’t a *heavy* smoker; it was irritating, fake somehow. Anyway after about three nights I thought I’d try and clear the air and offered to take her out for dinner. She refused, but was happy to share a bottle of wine. When I said I was missing Sabine (she was in Bodrum then at her parents’ holiday house) she accused me of being ‘obsessive’. I laughed, for the first time stating that I thought *she* had a crush on Sabine.

She didn’t miss a beat, and even though I detected the hint of a blush she quickly resumed her cool and pretended she didn’t know what I meant. When I elaborated she said I was ‘projecting’, that because I was so obsessed with her I assumed everyone else was. I laughed then she paused, and with those ‘big black eyes’, stared straight through me. She could be quite unnerving and for a moment I thought she might have a point. But then she said she wasn’t the *only* one who thought so and I realised, as we didn’t have anyone else in common, that she was bullshitting. So I lost it and said something like, “Actually I’d just like some fucking time alone with my girlfriend!” At which she flew into a rage and told me to fuck off back to Austria.’

Anna smiled. For Vincent, even despite of his recent reticence, this was quite a monologue.

‘So did Sabine know how Nadia felt?’

‘Suppose she must have! My biggest mistake *obviously* was to confide in her, Nadia that is.’

Vincent took a long drag on his cigarette; he seemed much more in his stride: as if suddenly he’d managed to gain some of his beloved ‘perspective’. He then went on to explain how things were when Sabine got back; how Nadia would only speak to him if Sabine was around, how Sabine insisted Nadia was ‘just working through stuff and that he shouldn’t take it so personally’. He also told them how Nadia would buy Sabine little treats, her favourite chocolate

mostly; and would constantly look for opportunities to spirit her away for coffee and chats; none of which he was privy to.

‘Girl talk perhaps?’ suggested Anna.

‘More like pillow talk!’ Vincent snorted.

‘So did you ever find out if they actually had a thing?’ pressed Therese.

‘No! Sabine was still sleeping with me, even though Nadia would wander into my bedroom, ostensibly to talk to her, whenever she felt like it.’

‘So then Sabine went to Paris and then on to Berlin to organise the exhibition?’ asked Anna.

‘Nice life!’ commented Therese.

‘Yeah, well like I said the family’s wealthy. Anyway when I got back from taking her to the airport I came home to Nadia, who instead of moping about, was in a virtual frenzy. She’d taken over the lounge room, had two canvasses on the go and was painting with a dedication that I envied. And though the paintings weren’t great they had a defiance that was somehow compelling. I knew she was pleased with them and desperately wanted my opinion but because she’d been so rude she could hardly ask, and of course I didn’t offer. She continued like this for a week and managed to knock out about a dozen more, all similarly intense, all maddeningly amounting to quite a decent body of work; one that I’m pretty sure, surprised her, as much as it did me. The flat was so jam packed with canvasses, (worse than the hallway is now) that not only did I no longer have any space to work, I could barely get in the door.’

‘So when did you pick up *your* paintings?’ asked Therese.

‘This morning, while you were asleep. She leant me her friend’s van.’

‘So is she having a show?’

‘Hang on! So, one morning, about a week after Sabine had gone, I went out for coffee and when I returned Nadia, most of her stuff *and* the paintings were gone.

I cleaned up. I was so excited I didn’t even bother to think why she’d gone. Sabine was due to arrive back that Saturday; we had vague dinner plans. When she still hadn’t arrived by Sunday, I tried both her Berlin numbers. Then when I couldn’t contact her on either I became suspicious; thought she might be seeing someone there. Three more days passed and still both phones rang off. I called in at Bar Londra to see if any of her friends were there and ran into Nadia, who in a kinder than usual mood, assured me that Sabine loved me and insisted that it was quite normal for her to occasionally ‘disappear’. She inferred it was a Turkish women’s thing, something cultural that I wouldn’t understand. I was fairly sure that I knew Sabine better than Nadia did, but because she was being so reasonable (even though she’d neglected to mention why she’d moved out so suddenly and not paid her rent) I chose to believe her. I know I’ve made Nadia sound dreadful but of course she has a certain charm. Seeing how upset I was she insisted on shouting me to dinner at a friend’s restaurant. After a bottle of their very best raki my mood improved considerably, and Nadia, grown tipsy, became quite confidential. She started by apologising about the rent, explaining that she’d gotten into a little debt, mainly due to the extravagances of her ratbag boyfriend, and ended by asking if she could come back to my place to pick up a few more of her things.’

Therese raised a quizzical eyebrow.

‘Well I was going home anyway...’

‘And then what happened? Asked Anna, who, by now was sitting on the edge of her chair, and, not wanting to distract Vincent, pointed to three of the mezze selections when the waiter arrived to take their orders.

‘The rest is fairly predictable really. We got stoned. She was chatty, a bit silly, her English isn’t the best so we were speaking in

Turkish, she was encouraging me to use the local slang, which was confusing and something I usually avoided. She was flattering me; telling me my “Austrian” accent was very sexy. I said something stupid like ‘I’d much rather sound Turkish than Austrian, which somehow she found hilarious. Like I said we were a bit out of it, but it seemed that we were friends again. She even told me things Sabine had said about me, confidential stuff, mostly complimentary. I told her I thought her new paintings were great and that she should have a show! Ha! We were both feeling pretty good about ourselves by this stage and then she asked me to paint her. I was a little taken aback. It was late and I wasn’t in the mood and I said no. She rolled another joint and asked if she could stay the night; she didn’t have money for a taxi.

I know this sounds stupid but as much as I wanted her to leave, I wanted her to stay, but really so she could reassure me about Sabine. I begged her to tell me if she thought Sabine was seeing someone else. She said no, but left enough of a pause to make me think otherwise. Then she leant in and kissed me. I pulled back and very slowly she began to take her clothes off. I asked her not to, said that it was chilly, and that she’d catch a cold. She laughed, draped her shawl around her waist and said, ‘Better?’

I felt really embarrassed. She became defensive and said something like, ‘What’s wrong Vincent? You don’t like me? I thought we could have a little fun. Sabine is in Berlin and I *know* she wouldn’t care!’

‘In English?’ asked Anna.

‘Bit of both!’ Vincent continued, ‘I looked at her and tried to connect. I couldn’t read her at all and said a little primly, “I think she would. We have a sort of arrangement.”’

Then she smiled, as if at a small child and said, “You haven’t been to Berlin have you Vincent?”

At which I replied a little heatedly, “Are you saying she’s got someone else? You just *said* she was in love with me?”

Then running her hand along my thigh, she said, “Come on Vincent, let’s go to bed. Sabine says you’re good and I’ve never been with an Austri...alian.””

‘So did you?’ asked Therese.

‘Well sort of!’

‘Well *that’s* very Australian Vincent!’ said Anna.

‘Shut-up! You have to understand she was pretty much telling me that Sabine was neither in love with me nor was it at all likely that she’d been faithful.’

‘I suppose!’ reasoned Anna, ‘Then what happened?’

‘Nadia told Sabine, and Sabine, who *had* been faithful to me was devastated that I’d slept with, “not just the first woman that came along, but one of her friends!”’

‘So why *did* she seduce you?’

‘Dunno! Cause I’m irresistible. Cause she’s a troublemaker. To get me kicked out of the show! Anyway like the gypsy woman said, “Someone with a black heart has their black eyes on you!”’

‘Oh, that’s creepy!’ said Therese.

‘I know, but it does account for the shit time I’ve been having. She was trying to tell me something else but it got lost in the translation.’

‘She kept pointing at your head!’ teased Anna.

Vincent smirked, ‘Probably recognised my psychic powers.’

‘She’s at least tweaked something. You seem much more yourself!’ Anna smiled.

‘Refill?’ chimed Therese, who’d missed Vincent’s sardonic ways and was relieved he seemed to be regaining his equilibrium.

Friday would be Therese and Anna’s last night and they were getting ready to go to Mustafa’s, when Vincent’s phone rang. He was looking rather fetching in his hand made shirt and black Lee jeans but suddenly all colour drained from his face. ‘When are you



coming back? Can't we talk about it? Sabine. Sabine!' Vincent hung onto the phone but the line was dead.

On their way to Mustafa's he could barely speak.

'Remember what the gypsy said Vincent, and let's have fun tonight.' Therese cautioned.

The same surly housemaid led them through to the living area where Mustafa was piercing olives with giant toothpicks. He had the stereo on full blast and bowed, flirting with Vincent and effusing about his gorgeous linen shirt as he poured martinis. Anna laughed when he plonked three olives into each glass.

'What?' he asked, feigning offence?

'Nothing they look fabulous.'

'In Turkey we have many olives!'

'Indeed. Cheers!'

And the evening rollicked along. Vincent had forgotten his woes and was discussing British artists like Bacon and Freud, most intensely with his host. Therese and Anna, were doing the same ridiculous dance moves they had delighted Mustafa with on their previous visit, but this time, as he reclined on a huge pile of cushions, rolling joints and gesticulating with Vincent, he seemed inured to them. Then rather abruptly, whilst still engrossed in conversation, Mustafa and Vincent left the room.

Sick of Mustafa's English music, Anna found some Turkish cassettes amongst the alphabetically ordered, adult contemporary collection. Therese placed an enamel platter on her head and was balancing it as she started into a bit of experimental dance – they'd been to the "Whirling Dervishes" museum the previous day and she was drawing rather heavily on the experience. Meanwhile Anna had made a faux hijab from a large embroidered shawl that was draped over one of the lounges and was intimating a snake dance. They were really hamming it up when suddenly the music stopped. Grinning at each other, they continued to show off, assuming Vincent and

Mustafa had returned, and were demanding that they change the music. When none came on they turned towards the stereo where a bald, late middle-aged, Englishman in a grey suit stood, staring at them.

‘And where is Mustafa?’ he asked quietly.

Good question, thought Anna. At that moment Mustafa was happily waltzing about the kitchen, arms draped about Vincent and enthusing about London nightclubs. Then, realising that the music had stopped and wasn’t about to come back on, he disentangled himself from Vincent. It was too close to gauge what, if anything, the Englishman had seen. Anna placed the shawl more delicately than was her nature, back on the armchair and Therese slipped the plate back onto the Ottoman bureau. The man, perspiring slightly, loosened his navy tie, and hissed at Mustafa. Then half way up the mahogany staircase, said,

‘Please wait in the hallway; a car will be here shortly to take you home.’

Mustafa, looking shrunken and defeated waved to them from the sepulchral doorstep.

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Vincent could barely wait to vacate the taxi to discuss what had just happened. As soon as they did, no longer constrained by ambiguity or decorum they laughed simultaneously, each causing the other to become more riotous. Vincent fell on the futon, ‘He must be some kind of British attache! Imagine coming home to three stoned and pissed Australians!’

‘Oh well, at least he wasn’t an Ottoman prince. Our performance would have been even more mortifying!’ joked Anna.

‘So what about the paintings?’ said Therese.

‘He does them himself.’

‘The attaché?’

‘No Mustafa! I snuck into his studio – that attic, when he went to the cellar to get more gin. They’re all straight out of *The History of Modern Art*. He’s doing Beckmann next – has a couple sketched out.’

‘Maybe the attaché sells them through the embassy,’ mused Therese.

Vincent laughed.

‘What?’ said Therese, ‘They’re good enough!’

‘You’re kidding aren’t you? His studio’s just an indulgence! He’s kept.’ exclaimed Vincent.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Vincent means he’s his bloody boyfriend!’ Anna looked incredulously at Therese.

‘Boyfriend? Houseboy? Bit of both!’ mused Vincent.

‘Oh poor Mustafa! Sighed Therese. ‘No wonder he likes hanging out at the Pudding Shop! Oh I nearly forget, I bought you both something at the bazaar!’ After rustling in her handbag she pulled out two velvet pouches.

‘Friendship rings!’ joked Vincent.

‘Not quite! I noticed that your flat doesn’t have any er... protection Vincent.’ Anna opened the pouch and held the blue eye up to the light. It was a milky blue, more porous and prettier than the standard versions.

‘Oh Therese, thankyou – it’s beautiful!’

As Vincent opened his he leant across to Therese, kissed her and whispered, ‘so sorry about the other night.’ She smiled, waving her arms to intimate it was nothing. It was Anna’s turn to be confused.

‘What’d he say?’ she said to Therese when Vincent went to the bathroom.

‘He just said, ‘Sorry I’ve been such a dick!’

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